

バグ

ゲート

自衛隊
彼の地にて、
斯く戦えり

5. 冥門編

Illustration: 黒獅子
柳内たくみ
Yanai Takumi

上

GATE - Thus the JSDF Fought There!

Vol.9: The Dark Gate (1st half)

by Takumi Yanai

[Novel Updates](#)

Translation Group: [Skythewood](#)

Epub: [Trollo WN/LN EPUB](#)

Illustration: 黒獅子
柳内たくみ
Yanai Takumi

自衛隊
彼の地にて、
斯く戦えり

ゲート

5.冥門編

上





Chapter 1

The JGSDF's Special Region Expedition Force formed two long columns of combat and supply vehicles, and they advanced along the gravel road.

The coarse tires of the heavy trucks filled the air with dust, drawing a veil over Arnus.

Said dust blackened the skin where it mixed with the sweat beading it, and it was hard just to keep their eyes open.

However, the men were in high spirits.

They held their rifles and faced forward, their backs held ramrod straight. Their combat boots pounded with broad strides, and the servicemen were filled with energy.

Everyone present understood that the upcoming battle would probably be the last one they would fight against the Empire.

"After this, the war'll be over."

"After it's done, we can all go home."

"We'll stop them once and for all."

Everyone had their own thoughts on the matter, and their own reasons to fight. It fuelled their fighting spirit, and it seemed as though Arnus was on fire from the heat steaming off them.

However, some people were not part of this blazing conflagration.

The higher the servicemen's spirits burned, the more intense the loneliness those girls felt.

The PX (Post Exchange) was bereft of customers, which made them all realize what would happen to Arnus' settlement if the Gate was closed.

The head chef could not help but get irritated as he saw the cat-eared

waitress drinking at the counter during the daytime.

“Meia! Are you free enough that you can drink in the day!?”

“I’m on break *nya*. *I need to use up my payed bay-kay-shun (paid vacation) days nya.*”

The catgirl laid her cheek on the counter, her ears twitching as she answered. She usually wore a maid’s dress, but today she was in casual attire.

She wore the prevailing fashion among Arnus’ demihumans, a pair of hot pants with a hole from which her tail protruded. The laces of her woven sandals encased a pair of pretty legs, and her lightly-swishing tail traced enchanting curves in the air for all around her to see.

Her upper body was sheathed in a loose tube top, her delicious armpits and bosom very nearly spilling out of its confines. It was high-cut, the better to bare her midriff and titillate all onlookers.

Simply put, she was a dazzling beauty.

For that reason, the customer density in the canteen mysteriously went up around the counter where she sat.

The workers and the mercenaries hired by the traders enjoyed their meals as they enjoyed the sight of her.

If this were nighttime in another city, drunkards with ulterior motives would surely flock to her. However, it was daytime, and she was among familiar company, which was why Meia could drink in peace and with her guard lowered, despite the feast she was providing the surrounding eyes.

However, the head chef was clearly annoyed by drunk ladies in particular.

“You wouldn’t scold a drunk male, this is discrimination ~nya.”

“No! It’s different! It’s very troublesome for a lady who doesn’t know what kind of situation she’s in when people with ill intentions approach her. If you’re careless about these things, it’ll lead to dire consequences. That’s carelessness on the woman’s part.”

The head chef’s words were also a veiled warning to the men around her, who were searching for an opening they could exploit.

Thus, he decided to change the chiding tone in which he addressed Meia.

“Say, Meia. You don’t get vacations like these often. Why not spend them meaningfully?”

“And what exactly is meaningful ~nya?”

“For instance, cleaning your room, washing your clothes, mending things... they should all have accumulated, no? The day’d go by in a flash if you did them.”

“I do stuff like that everyday, so there’s nothing left for me to do ~nya.”

One could tell that Meia was a hardworking girl from her answer. Given Meia’s personality, she was not the sort of person who would put off until tomorrow what she could do today.

“How about having fun and chatting with someone? I’ll introduce a guy to you, how about that?”

The men around her chorused, “Yeah, that’s right” in time with the head chef’s words, as though they all wanted to be chosen to have fun with her. However, Meia simply laughed off the head chef’s suggestion.

“You mean, having fun in Arnus ~nya?”

Unfortunately, Arnus lacked any entertainment facilities. Window-shopping or browsing through wares held no interest for her. She was intimately familiar with the layout of the stores and the contents of their shelves. To her, there was no mystery in where they were and what they stocked.

“Also, just looking at my friends’ faces is boring ~nya.”

Recently, the residents of Arnus had begun discussing what they would do once the Gate closed when two or more of them gathered in one place. The people often fretted about what they would do afterwards, what would happen to them and so on.

“And besides, he’s gone off to fight~nya. I mean, I could go out with another guy, but I’m hardly that sly *nya*... *I’m so lonely nya*.”

“What’s this, Meia? You’ve got a man?”

“We don’t have that kind of relationship yet *nya*. *But I wouldn’t mind going there nya.*”

“Is he from Nihon?”

Meia slowly raised her head, looked drunkenly at the head chef, and nodded silently.

“That, that, uh... yeah, that’s pretty rough.”

After the head chef forced those words out, he scratched his head.

This was not just worrying about her future or the loss of her boyfriend; it was not too much of an exaggeration to call it a two-hit combo of losing her job and lover at once. The head chef was familiar with the damage of such a double impact; he had experienced the loss of his wife and his job simultaneously as well.

“So... does he know how you feel?”

Meia shook her head from where she was sprawled on the table.

If he did not dislike Meia, then there was a chance that he might stay. In fact, there were rumors that they had begun taking volunteers to stay behind, and many people had applied. For instance, it was public knowledge that Kurata and Tomita from the former 3rd Recon were among those people.

However, they would need to have a good relationship in order for him to choose to stay. If Meia kept her feelings to herself, it would be pointless.

“Say, Meia. Why not just confess to him? Then beg him to stay or something.”

Meia’s eyes grew moist, and she pouted, “I can’t do that ~nya.”

She said that if he stayed here, he would be forced to part ways with his family.

Once the Gate closed, there was no telling how much time would pass in Japan even if they opened it again soon after.

In the worst-case scenario, he would have to say farewell to them forever. Meia was not selfish enough to impose herself on him like that.

“In that case, why not go to Nihon?”

Several days ago, there had been a public conference about what would happen after governance of the Arnus region was transferred to Japan.

If the current residents of Arnus wanted to live in Japan, they could apply for Japanese citizenship or permanent residency. Either option would allow them to stay in Japan.

However, the thought of that made Meia very uneasy. Living in a foreign land was very difficult to wrap her mind around.

She had not experienced any difficulty with the language, habits and her job around the JSDF servicemen, because the servicemen had always been on their best behavior. However, she had keenly felt it when a group of embedded reporters had come too.

They looked at her like a talking dog or cat. If there were many people like that on the other side of the Gate, then she would have to amply prepare her heart. She would need determination to survive, because an immature love was far too unreliable for that.

“If I was working, I wouldn’t have the time to think about this ~nya, but now that I’m free, that’s the only thing in my head ~nya...” Meia continued as she pleaded drunkenly for the alcohol to continue, and she turned a sparkly gaze on the waitress working frantically in the cantina.

“This place looks as busy as always ~nya.”

“Ahhh... there’s fewer customers at night, but the daytime crowd hasn’t been affected. The Jayesdeef people take their lunch in their own canteens and so they won’t come here. Well... it feels like this sort of thing is going to carry on for a while.”

In any case, if the Gate was closed, there would be less meaning to the existence of this town, and its population would naturally drop. The workers, mercenary guards, carpenters and other people would also take their leave. Meia was aware and prepared of the possibility of being reassigned or transferred. It was possible that she might be sent to a branch in the Imperial Capital or some other big city.

“Meia, if you do well, you could be assigned to the branch in the Imperial

Capital. It'd be better than a small town like this. The big city won't lack for places where you can have fun, and it ought to be more interesting than over here."

However, Meia shook her head.

"There's nowhere which can compare to this place ~nya."

"Ah, I guess."

The head chef acknowledged her point as well.

Unless one lived in an old city, the humans there would generally be opposed to demihumans and they would receive the cold shoulder. Given the Academy City of Londel's long history, it should have been no exception, and yet there were certain old parts of the city which looked down on newer inhabitants.

"If I could work in the cantina, wouldn't that mean I could stay in Arnus ~nya? If you're got the luxury of hiring new people, then why not hire me ~nya?"

Meia looked enviously at one of the new waitresses, who did not quite seem used to her job yet.

"No, she's a different case."

There was embarrassment on the head chef's face as he answered.

Meia found it strange; why had he hired a female Dragonkin as a waitress? She did not seem very skilled, and she could not understand the reason for it given the head chef's inclinations.

"Really ~nya?"

"Ahh, it's just so she can pay off her debt with her wages, don't get me wrong."

The head chef clammed up, not wishing to discuss the topic any further.

"Giselle~san, clear these."

"Oh-kay~"

The priestesses of Emroy, God of Darkness, were famous for dressing in black goth outfits.

However, the white goth outfit was more well-known.

Anyone who did not know that someone in that outfit was a priestess of Hardy, Goddess of the Underworld, was probably not a resident of the Special Region.

It was just like how people would associate someone in a nun's outfit with a Christian church or convent, or someone in a kasa with Buddhism, or someone in a miko's clothes with the Shinto religion.

Besides, there were hardly any other female Dragonkin around who wore white goth outfits.

Therefore, everyone stared with gaping mouths at the apron-clad Giselle as she wound her way through the gaps between the tables. It was as though time had stopped for a moment.

A pair of Wolfman mercenary guards, who had thought to wet their throats in the cantina and wash off the dust of the road, froze in place as they gawped at her.

"Oi, Wolf, since when did this place become a gothpray (cosplay) cantina?"

"So this is what the Nihonjin call a gothpray cafe, it took me by surprise. Well, that's the Arnus Living Community for you; they've brought Nihon's fashions over. Well done on getting a Dragonkin girl to put on a white goth outfit."

After the two of them denied what they had just seen with their own eyes, they breathed a sigh of relief.

However, the familiar-looking waitress said, "This isn't cosplay, this is the real deal," whereupon the two of them were shocked once more.

"So, so wait, that means, it's... it's really from Belnago..."

Wolf tugged on his cheek, as he patted the shoulder of a Dwarf friend drinking at the counter.

The Dwarf dipped his chin in agreement.

"But, but how could this be? Can you really say that? If she's the person herself, then she would be the Her Eminence Giselle, but then she's working in a place like this..."

This was like seeing a TV idol doing the dishes in a ramen cantina.

“It’s hardly strange, right? Her Holiness Rory is working here too, no?”

“But Her Holiness is doing a great service here. Yet, your Eminence Giselle is performing servant’s work; surely we could do something like that, no?”

“You say that, but it’s already happened. It’s a lo~ng story.”

The Dwarf put his beer down and sat up properly.

“Want to hear about it?”

“Ahh, very much.”

“First things first, this isn’t a funny story. What I’m going to tell you is a tragedy that will impress the cruelty of the world onto you.”

The two mercenaries nodded, and sat down beside the Dwarf.

“Alright, here it goes.”

These words would stand as an eternal message and lesson to future generations: “Even a Demigoddess has to work off her debts if she can’t pay them off.”

In order to understand the nature of what happened, we will need to turn the clock back to the time when Giselle arrived in Arnus. As the Demigoddess placed in charge of observing how Rory and Itami completed the task set for them by Hardy, it made perfect sense for Giselle to come to Arnus. And so, Giselle boarded the flying machine called a “helicopter” to reach Arnus.

“Ah... you’re going to Arnus?”

Itami’s question was directed at the seated Dragonkin woman, who had an clueless look on her face.

“Yes, something troublesome came up.”

“Then we’ll have to stop over halfway at Tenska, and one of our combat

teams will escort you back. However, we might run into some fighting along the way; will that be alright?"

"That's fine. I don't mind."

"That settles it, then."

Itami had no intention of barring her from taking a Chinook.

However, their interaction had given rise to a misunderstanding on Giselle's part. Itami had not refused her a ride, but that did not mean that he had agreed to care for her and treat her as a guest to be plied with food and drink.

In truth, Itami was distracted by transporting the kidnappee and responding to the scholars, so he did not have enough energy to care about Giselle. Once Giselle had arrived at Arnus, she had been cut loose, but she assumed that all her expenses would be paid for, and so she ate and drank and ordered as her appetite directed her, and in the end she had gotten into trouble.

After Giselle stuffed herself full of food and wine, she told the waitress, "That was delicious, thanks for your hospitality. Now where will I be staying?"

Her answer was a bill thrust into her face.

"What's this?"

The waitress evaded Giselle's gaze, and answered plainly and clearly, as though she did that sort of thing every day.

"Ah, it's a request for payment for the food and drink you consumed, dear customer."

"Eh!? What's that supposed to be? Didn't that Itamy punk tell you?"

After sensing trouble brewing, the head chef cum manager stepped in to take the waitress' place.

"Does this involve the boss of the ALC?"

"Yes, he's currently with Rory-oneesama."

"So it's something to do with Boss Itamy. Still, he never mentioned anything about you, you know?"

"I see, that kid must have been in a rush and forgot to tell you. That's fine; I'll

get in touch with Itamy afterwards and let him clear things up.”

The head chef saw the confident smile on Giselle’s face and wondered if he had gotten something wrong.

And the fact was, it was quite common for Giselle... for a demigod to not have to pay for their food and drink. The head chef had even heard with his own ears of cases where people had offered up their establishments to them.

For instance, when Hardy had possessed Lelei for her binge, not only had she not been asked to pay, but the temple had settled the bill in full. No, the fact was, they might not even have been asked to pay at all; in a city of shrines and temples, being able to claim “an apostle came to our cantina and we catered to her desires” was excellent publicity.

This was not that city, and there was nobody rushing to pay the Demigoddess Giselle’s bills for her. Usually, there were small shrines to Hardy in a city, itinerant priests taking the role of missionaries, or perhaps a local worship group which gathered donations. All of them could contribute to paying for a demigod’s food and board.

Therefore, she wanted to tell the head chef that all these matters had already been settled. That being the case, all that was needed was to talk with the ALC and Itami again.

However, after waiting for a little while, he came back with news that plunged Giselle into an abyss of despair.

“Dear customer, Boss Itami says that he doesn’t know of any arrangement like this.”

“Ehhh!? No way!”

“Still, since the boss doesn’t know about this, all we can do is claim payment from you, your Eminence.”

“Then, then what about the local temple or other religious bodies?”

The head chef shook his head sadly. There were no shrines or priests of Hardy in this newly-built town, and unfortunately, none of the faithful were present either.

No, one of them had been here once, but not any more. She recalled Yao's face.

In any case, Giselle would have to tackle the expenses she had racked up through her drinking and dining by herself. Nobody could or would pay on her behalf.

"Besides, Boss Itami isn't a worshipper of Hardy. Come to think of it, given the Flame Dragon incident, he ought to be an enemy of yours. Did you stop to think about why he'd feed or house you?"

"When... when we were in Kunapnui, he fed me..."

Itami had once given a very hungry Giselle a good meal. In truth, she had not been expecting it, so she had been overjoyed, and she had wept despite herself. Her emotions had swelled up, their past grudges seemed like water under the bridge, and the relationship between them seemed to have taken a turn for the better. However, that had simply been a moment's fancy.

"Dear customer, that was then. This is now."

Giselle broke out in a cold sweat as she asked the head chef:

"Then, then, uh, couldn't you treat it as an offering?"

"No can do."

The head chef and the waitress offered her the bill with smiles on their faces. Their smiles were sweet and bright and terribly, terribly calculating.

Giselle cried foul.

"Rory-oneesama eats here too! You don't collect from her either! This is religious discrimination!"

"No, it's not like that."

"How isn't it like that! It feels like discrimination, so this is clearly discrimination! If you don't do something about it, I'll have to demand an apology and compensation!"

"Discrimination refers to unreasonable treatment, but her Holiness Rory's treatment here is not unreasonable, because her Holiness Rory is one of the

representatives of the ALC, which manages life here. In other words, she's one of us."

"Eh?"

After the head chef's explanation, Giselle finally understood.

This cantina was managed by the ALC, which Rory, Lelei and Tuka represented. Another way to put it was that this entire town belonged to the ALC. Since Rory was a representative of the ALC, it only stood to reason that she would be treated differently from Giselle. Therefore, Giselle crossed off the idea of "dine-and-dashing" from her mind.

Arnus Town was essentially a temple to Rory. If she tried to rip them off, there was no telling what price she would have to pay for it in the future.

The slashes of Rory's halberd and the terrible sight of sand and stones flying in the wake of Itami's attack still resounded within her mind and made her body trembled. Giselle felt her head burning as those misunderstood memories gripped her.

In addition, they might submit a petition of complaint to Belnago saying, "Your demigod dined and dashed, we are submitting a claim for damages."

That would be very embarrassing. At the very least, it would severely undermine Giselle's authority. In addition, Belnago Shrine might end up losing face as well. That would be terrible.

"What's this disturbance about? If you're making trouble in Arnus, it won't be something we can simply write off with 'for free,' you know."

Just then, the ALC's leadership, helmed by Rory, came by to see what was going on after receiving a report from the local police post.

Suddenly, among all this, Giselle saw a ray of light in the form of the flat-chested Lelei.

Giselle was quite tall, so seeing her hug the comparatively short Lelei was a fairly bizarre sight. However, in Giselle's eyes, Lelei was her final lifeline.

"Please, Lelei! You're one of Hardy's vassals, right? You're on my side, right? Right!?"

The fact that the goddess of the underworld had taught Lelei how to open the Gate implied that she was a servant of Hardy, and thus aligned with Giselle. That was how the world would see it, no matter what Lelei thought of it.

Hearing this, the head chef narrowed his eyes and said, “So, Lelei-chan, huh? I see... so, what do you intend to do, Lelei? Will you pay for her?”

However, Lelei’s face was blank as she shook her head.

“No.”

“But whyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

Lelei’s cold reply was like being dumped off the side off a cliff by a would-be rescuer. Giselle sagged like a deflated balloon.

She had been a demigoddess for hundreds of years, and she had fought against countless powerful foes. Of all the damage her mind and body had taken, Lelei’s words ranked up there with the slashes of Lelei’s halberd and the JSDF’s concentrated bombardments.

Perhaps she thought Giselle was a pitiful, because Lelei added:

“I can give you a loan, though.”

“Really!? You will!?”

Giselle recovered in an instant.

“However, the interest will be calculated in ten-one terms.”

Giselle collapsed to her knees in despair, as though all her previous excitement had been a waste of time. Ten-one interest terms meant that one tenth of the principal would be added onto the loan for every ten days that went by.

This outrageously exploitative interest rate would be illegal under Japan’s loan-interest laws. However, in a world where being a creditor was tremendously risky and there was a high chance of the debtor defaulting on their loans, they were considered very forgiving terms for a loan.

“Uuu...”

Giselle grit her teeth, but as she thought about it, she realized that it was the

only way.

Still, it was true that if she did not pay the loan off, her debt would snowball and make things worse. Giselle knew that point very well.

On the whole, the three most common wishes made by templegoers were, “Please make me rich” and “Please forgive all my debts”. Also, there was “Please give me someone to marry.”

It would seem that she could send an IOU to the temple at Belnago. However, given that the interest was calculated at ten-one terms, factoring in her additional expenses in the interim, her food bills and the like, the sum that would need to be paid would swell to a horrifying degree. The priest in charge of the temple’s finances would surely complain about it, and Mistress Hardy herself would give her an earful, so she had to avoid that as much as possible.

“...It.. it’s no good...”

Giselle was already kneeling on the ground with tears in her eyes. Now, she collapsed onto her butt and flailed around while crying:

“Dammit! You’re all in on this, aren’t you? You’ve been playing me from the start! Why don’t you just cut the eleven wunts of flesh from my chest!” The saying, “to cut eleven wunts of flesh from one’s chest” came from a story about how a debtor guaranteed a loan with his life. One could say it was the Special Region’s equivalent of “the Merchant of Venice”.

It was a commonly-used phrase directed at loansharks, which meant, “Are you trying to kill me by making me pay my debts?” That said, it lacked persuasive power when spoken by a demigod, who could live on despite having their limbs chopped off and their chests crushed.

However, it suited her Eminence Giselle, who often spoke in extraordinary ways, and it also concerned a “certain matter’ that was constantly on the minds of Rory and Lelei.

The two of them stared at Giselle like they were nailing her to a cross, gawking at the voluminous peaks upon her chest with no restraint whatsoever.

Their fullness and tautness was exquisite, and their ample weight seemed to say, “do whatever you want with me”, as though they would not change no

matter how much one played or toyed with them.

Then, both of them glanced down at their own chests, before suddenly shifting to flank Giselle, touching and squeezing her breasts as though to verify their sensation and quality.

“I’m still growing, so I don’t need 11 wunts, but one, maybe two wunts would be okay, given their bounciness...”

“Lelei, don’t you have a spell to make parts of your body grow?”

“Those spells are taboo. 20 years ago, there was a sorceress who kidnapped girls and swapped bodies with them, and in the end a certain Demigoddess chopped her head off.”

“Ah... that was me.”

As she saw their thoughts warping before her eyes, Tuka decided to speak up and silence them.

“Cease your wicked thoughts! Your own bodies are the most important thing. Also, have you two forgotten the results of analysing Father’s preferences? There’s no point engaging in such vulgarity, do you understand?”

Tuka was rebuking them for their words and deeds, and not denigrating Giselle’s bosom as a vulgar one. However, Giselle whimpered as she heard those words, which had wounded her deeply.

“V-vulgar...”

“Then, what should she do?”

“Obviously she’s going to pay it back with her body..”

Tuka’s eyes seemed to be licking at Giselle’s body. She trembled from the sudden chill in the air and hugged herself unconsciously.

“Do you mean... I, I’ll use this... this body to make money? Do, do you mean that I’m going to work like the worshippers of Militta do?”

Militta was the goddess who governed the harvest and children.

Being a believer of Militta was nothing to be afraid of. The problem was that the priestesses in her temples were also temple prostitutes, and some of her

faithful lived by the principle that they had to serve as a temple prostitute themselves at least once in their lives.

Of course, some female believers rejected that aspect of their faith, but there were also those who said that a safe birth was the greatest worry of any woman.

Surprisingly enough, the infant and maternal mortality among her followers was less than 1%. This was a startling record in a world with such backward medical practices, and so she had many followers.

In addition, there was another reason for that: while a prostitute could not choose her clients when she worked, the temples of Militta taught secret techniques that could ensnare a client as a fiancé. Therefore, it was quite common for supplicants to follow their ceremony of completing their sacred service with a wedding ceremony the next day. Of course, there were some cases where it did not work and some of those stories were overly embellished, but in general there would be no problems if one arranged things with the clergy ahead of time. The goddess was quite adept at such matters.

The existence of Militta was the best proof of the variety of faiths in the Special Region and the ways in which they differed.

Giselle frantically shook her head.

“Besides, I don’t know anything about men! I can’t do it, I’m very sorry! I just can’t do it, I’m really very sorry!”

Giselle bowed her head nervously, and confessed that she was still a virgin ever since she had come to the temple at a young age to be elevated to the status of a demigoddess. And so, Rory laughed wickedly and nibbled Giselle’s ear.

“That’s fine. Tuka will gladly devour men and women alike. You’ve worked in the shrine for so long; surely you’ve built up an immunity to women by now?”

Nunneries could be considered a form of women’s-only territory, and homosexual relationships were quite common there. The mood in the air was like that of a girl’s-only middle or high school. Giselle’s masculine behavior and speech would be very popular in such places.

The waitress' emotions surged, and she went "kyaaa~" in a lewd fashion.

The ladies turned their eyes to Tuka the Elf. It would seem there were many in Arnus who swung that way. In addition, given her partner would be Giselle the demigoddess, it felt a little like an angel coupling with a fallen angel, and the prevailing mood in the air took a turn for the erotic.

However Tuka wagged her finger and corrected, "Tsk tsk, not like that."

"Strictly speaking, I'm my father's girl."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"That's different. I'm not okay with just about any man! I won't accept anyone who isn't Father."

As this strange exchange took place over her head, Giselle — worried for her fate — tremulously asked:

"Ah... when you said I should earn money with my body..."

Tuka pressed a waitress' apron onto her and said:

"I meant that you should pay your debts by working, of course."

After the dreadful intimidation from just now, Giselle immediately agreed with, "Ah, I can do that!"

And so, Giselle had to work in Arnus' cantina in order to pay back the bills for her food and drink. Her duties included receiving customers, serving food, doing the dishes, sweeping, and many others beside. In truth, she did not actually owe that much; she could have cleared her debt if she worked hard for ten days.

However, she ate more than what the cantina gave her every night.

For a connoisseur of drink like Giselle, weak ales could not satisfy her. At some point, she had downed expensive imported brandies, wine, champagne and many others, so her debt remained high and she was forced to continue working.

Giselle complained in regret.

"Dammit, it's all because the food was too good."

She cursed the cuisine even as she unconsciously opened a bottle of champagne. She did not want to blame the alcohol she so loved, so she was unconsciously running away from the truth.

“And that’s how it is.”

The Dwarf finished narrating Giselle’s tale.

“I see...”

Wolf and his buddy had no idea how to feel about all this. On the one hand, he pitied her, but on the other, he felt that she deserved everything she had gotten.

The Dwarf sensed the subtle change in the mood and stood up, saying, “Ah, time to work.”

After that, he left his payment for his meal, and an extra copper coin for Giselle as an offering.

“Here?”

“Yup.”

Wolf left her a coin from his pouch as well, and then asked the Dwarf:

“Is there still work for a carpenter in town?”

Arnus Town ought to have been fully built, so one would not see carpenters running hither and yon like they had before.

Of course, there were still a few small jobs to be handled, like say making shipping crates or fixing wagons. Dwarves, being a race of craftsmen, were the best-suited for that kind of work.

However, the Dwarf replied that he was still quite busy.

“Maybe you didn’t notice since you were in town, but refugees are coming over from the other side of the hill. That means we need to build longhouses, which means more work for me.”

The JSDF transport vehicles had been moving out as the mercenaries talked with the Dwarf.

“Thank you very much.”

Giselle carefully bade the customers farewell in a polite tone.

After clearing away the beer steins and dishes, she found the offering they had left for her and stuffed it tightly into her pockets with both hands. Ever since she had started working here, she had come to truly empathize with others and keenly feel for them with her own heart.

Mealtime ended and the customers began to disperse slowly, leaving only the cat-eared girl Meia, who was slumped drunkenly over the counter.

It would be very bad if they roused her and turned her out to wander the streets drunkenly, so the head chef allowed her to sleep in the cantina. Giselle shifted her to one of the tables she was not cleaning.

“Sweep, clean, sweep, clean...”

Cleaning work had to be done after the lunch hour rush.

With a broom and a cloth in hand, Giselle set about cleaning.

Mercenaries were crude while the merchants often ate hastily. The carpenters were just messy. All this meant that their food and drink went all over the floor, which was then carelessly trampled into the floorboards.

Naturally, sweeping alone would not do the trick, so Giselle’s job was to bend over and pick the refuse off the ground. The other waitresses rested themselves during these three hours in preparation for business at night.

“Dammit! I haven’t done this since I was an apprentice priestess!”

Giselle was over 400 years old. Therefore, to a regular person, her days of being an apprentice must have been ancient history.

In her youth, she had not lived in Belnago Shrine, but in a nunnery dedicated to raising priestesses who worshipped Hardy. There, she had been a trainee Dragonkin priestess. Her days had been spent in tedious misery like this.

On winter mornings, they would have to break the frozen-over surface of the

well water, then squeeze their icy cloths dry, then rinse them again after they were done cleaning. If they were not thorough enough, their seniors would nag them, and their hands were numbed by ice and covered in scrapes and cuts.

The second joints of her fingers often got cute, and the blood flowing from them often stained her rags red.

After that, she spent a very long, arduous time as a junior priestess.

Perhaps other races might have been promoted after considering their age and the need for them to retire, but Giselle's race was very long-lived, so they treated her as a juvenile, and so she was angry about being stuck as priestess of the lowest order. She was constantly surpassed by younger juniors, who had not even been born yet when she had taken holy orders, and they found fault with her, looked down on her, and bossed her around all day long.

As she recalled her past torments, she suddenly realized that her tears had wetted the floorboards.

"Ah, huh... what's this... dammit, my eyes are watering up. What is this, why... uuu... Mama!"

It was clear that she was feeling homesick once more.

She thought of her mother, who had been dead for several centuries now. Her mother was a very gentle woman, who had urged her to "be a good priestess."

The sign that Hardy bestowed upon Giselle was how she would constantly recall her mother.

Sometimes, she wondered about the reason for it, but until today, she still did not know.

Becoming a demigoddess was independent of one's status in the church, one's species, or bloodline. So long as the person in question had talent and was willing to work hard, as well as something called "plus alpha". In truth, the plus alpha was the most important thing, but why was that? None of it was clear at all.

(TL Note: Plus Alpha roughly corresponds to "x-factor" or "something special")

“I guess it’s just up to your luck.”

There were people who held such extreme viewpoints.

It was an explanation similar to how people within a particularly religion would tell each other, “that person must have been favored by God”. When Giselle became a Demigod, they explained it as her steady accumulation of silent virtue, without letting her faith waver even while occupying the lowest ranks, had caught the eye of the Goddess Hardy.

However, Giselle did not like that explanation.

She felt uneasy once her situation changed, and in an effort to continue the daily life she was used to, she hid the fact that she had become a Demigoddess.

Therefore, she had hidden her identity for over 10 years after becoming a demigod, imitating her senior from the church of Emroy.

However, things did not go as well for Giselle as they did for the Apostle of Emroy.

The Apostle of Emroy had become widely renowned for chopping the head off an unjust high priest in order to save a trainee priest who had been falsely accused of a crime. However, there were no such impressive stories for Giselle. She had accidentally cut her finger while working in the kitchen and her wound had healed instantly. Everyone saw it, and so the rumors spread.

That had sparked a tremendous change in her situation.

The people who had looked down on her until yesterday instantly changed their tune, as though they had always expected that to happen.

“I always knew you’d become someone great. I gave you a hard time for that sake. It would be nice if you could pay me back for it.”

“I raised up Giselle!”

“Your Eminence Giselle, please order me around as you will... all these things that happened in the past, all those unpleasant things that came before... let me work hard to serve you and let them be water under the bridge... I’m very sorry, that ought to be enough, right...”

Even if she did not like it, her entire world had changed, and she keenly felt it.

And then, there was none of that at Arnus. They had not slackened off even after learning she was a demigoddess. They had even told her that if she could not pay her debts, she would have to work them off.

“Heh, you really do have a lot of guts.”

Giselle’s hands did not stop working as she muttered to herself.

Eventually, the floor was spotless, and after putting the chairs down and wiping the sweat on her forehead with her apron, she looked smugly upon the fruit of her hard work.

“How is it? Clean, right?”

Giselle would surely have asked that of any onlookers if they were around.

“Alright, that’s settled!”

She dusted her hands off to announce the completion of her task, and she smiled in satisfaction, because now

“I did all this with the sweat of my brow,” she muttered to herself

Then, as though waiting for those words, Rory came by.

“Giselle, have you been working hard?”

She then said, “I’ll have a milk teat today”, and the head chef replied, “yes, she’s been doing a good job” before reaching for a glass from the shelf.

Giselle bowed politely to her and said, “This way please,” then brought her to the VIP room in the back of the cantina,

Rory took a seat, but Giselle did not leave.

She knew Giselle wanted to use this lull period when no customers were around to sit down and talk to her about difficult matters.

However, she had not expected Giselle to start speaking even before sitting down.

“Oneesama, you can do something about the Apocryph, right?”

Giselle had learned from her subordinate Wyverns that the Apocryph was continuing to spread. She might have been the lowest-ranked of them all, but

her heart was still linked to that of a god who took care of the world, and Giselle knew that the end of the world was upon them.

She could not simply ignore the spread of the black fog. However, Rory did not seem as worried as Giselle did.

Rory said, "I'm going to put my faith in them and wait, so you don't need to worry about the Gate, Giselle." She smiled, then spooned up the frothy foam on the milk tea which the head chef brought.

"I'll wait and believe in them too, but the world might end in the meantime,." she said.

"I know that too."

"So why are you handing such an important thing to humans to handle? Can't we close it by ourselves!?"

Giselle was implying that this was the reason for which demigods existed.

If someone protested, all they had to do was reply, "the gods said so, what about it?" and that would end the conversation right there. That was the thrust of Giselle's argument.

"Everything would have ended if you had just wrecked the Gate with your halberd, onesama. I probably couldn't do it on my own, but if we laid into it together, surely we could smash that shabby thing, no? Why was the Gate entrusted to mankind?"

"The desires that drive them might bring about the end of the world, or conversely, they might pass up this rare opportunity due to the danger, or they might manage it wisely and sensibly. There are many possibilities for them, and I would like to let them choose on their own."

"Well, you say you'll let them decide, but in the end won't it be the decision of just one or two people? Can you really say that's the decision of humanity?"

"Indeed. Even if only one human decides, it's still the decision that humanity made, and not the result of what we did. This is the motivation for them to be aware of themselves."

"Are you doing what Tarles did, onesama?"

Tarles was the name of an old god.

According to the legends, the old gods said that mankind was too young and they would hurt themselves if they played with fire, which was why they did not give it to them. But Tarles decided that humanity could be wise enough handle fire, and so he granted them fire.

“Without him, perhaps humanity might still be eating raw meat and freezing like beasts. He believed in mankind.”

“Still, they betrayed his trust, and they continue to betray it even now. Mankind uses fire to wage war and burn each other to death. There’s a huge difference between knowing how to use fire and knowing when to use it, onesama.”

“That’s true. But no human starts out able to swim. They learn to swim as they struggle not to drown. That’s how mankind grows, like seeds. If they avoid the water and fear it because they almost drowned once, then they’re a weak race whose fate is extinction.”

“Still, humans all want to live in luxury. You can’t expect too much of them. If you lower your guard, humans might slack off, get carried away, or just end up thinking of themselves. Can such humans govern themselves so strictly?”

“Giselle, were you born a Demigoddess?”

“No, but...”

“Did you think about why Hardy gave Lelei the ability to make Gates?”

“Was it... a reward?”

Giselle had thought that Hardy had possessed a suitable girl nearby to satisfy her appetite.

“Surely that’s not all, right!?”

Rory poked her temple with her index finger, indicating that she should use her brain.

“Ggh, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Can’t you just tell me already?”

“I’ll give you a hint, then. From the beginning, we’re unable to do what we shouldn’t be doing. It’s just like how humans are born unable to see the backs of their heads with their own eyes. Wanting to do so is what is truly forbidden.”

“What the hell? Are you retarded? Who would do something like that? Besides, if someone really wanted to do that, they could just use a mirror.”

“Indeed they could, but they can’t see it with their own eyes. That is an absolute taboo; I won’t do it and I don’t feel there’s any point in doing it. There’s no way it’s possible for you, given the structure of your body.”

“Mm, that’s true.”

“The fact is, this sort of situation is quite commonplace. There are sages all over the world who are deeply immersed in researching this theory.”

“In other words, anything you can conceive of is possible for you. Like incest and fratricide, if you can think of it, you can do it!”

Giselle’s answer seemed to have been exactly what Rory had predicted. Thus, her lips formed into a happy smile.

“Yes, which means you can do it if you want to.”

Giselle’s eyes went wide, and then she shook her head in disbelief.

“So you mean, humanity is free to destroy itself?”

“That may be taking it a little far, but yes. Humanity has always been free to choose whatever they want to choose.”

“But that’s no good, is it, onesama? We exist because they think that they can do anything as long as they aren’t stopped, right? When humans think they’re the greatest, they become proud. So shouldn’t we keep them under control and kill them off when they decide to do something stupid!?”

“That is to say, the Gate itself is not dangerous, but mankind is. The danger of the Gate is like that of a sword or a flame, but humanity is the true threat.”

“Ah...”

Giselle finally realized what Rory was hinting at.

“If they run from dangerous things or drop anything dangerous they pick up,

mankind will eventually abandon everything and destroy themselves. The reason why this has not yet happened is because we play the role of suppressors, and so humanity has not yet realized how dangerous they really are. But what is the result of that? The humans of this world have a history that spans tens of thousands of years, yet they have stagnated and grown sluggish, as though they were dead. In order to avoid this sort of destruction, the gods have used various means to try and shake this world into motion again. This is why Hardy brought the new species over. It is unfortunate, but we have to acknowledge the differences between us and the other world. In addition, Hardy's given the cleanup of the Gate to mankind while she watches from the side. So what do you think, Giselle? Don't you think mankind can really overcome their own destruction?"

"That's impossible, right? Even the people working in this cantina are all opposed to closing the Gate because of their livelihoods. Everyone's gaining from the Gate, so nobody would decide to close it, right?"

"Of course not. There are people who are seriously thinking about the well-being of this world."

"Like who?"

"Lelei and Tuka, for instance. And Youjy too."

Rory felt that the reason why Hardy had entrusted the world to them was in order to see if humanity could improve themselves by doing so.

"Onesama, are you mad? Why would She think that way? Why can you believe in humanity?"

"Ara, do you think I'm sane? I'm the Apostle of the god of madness, you know."

Giselle looked like she wanted to say something, but she swallowed her words. That was because that was true, when she thought about it.

"Love is a form of madness too. Anyone in love is insane by default."

"In other words, you think they're going to grow, onesama..."

"You need to be aware of our responsibilities to this world. We have to keep

ourselves in check. I think that was the reason why she joined the two worlds. Hardy and I agree on that point, which is the motivation for all this.”

“But it’s so dangerous...”

“I’m about to ascend to divinity myself. If you watched and did nothing when you felt you should have acted, isn’t that because you’re growing as well?”

“Honestly, that sort of thing has never worked.”

Rory sighed heavily as she saw Giselle shake her head.

“Hardy’s unfortunate for not having an Apostle who can second-guess her.”

“Sorry for being dumb.”

“I once heard Yao say, ‘If Hardy says black is white, then it’s white’; are you basically saying you’ve given up thinking on your own?”

Rory savagely attacked Giselle’s misplaced faith.

The “gods” of this world were not mere concepts; if a god pacted with its followers that “you’ll be happy as long as you have faith,” would anyone believe such a ridiculous thing? The Apostles who venerated them should not obey blindly, but they had to thoroughly question themselves and their gods’ dictates.

“That’s why all you can do is serve as a gopher and so on.”

“Then what should I do, onesama?”

“For starters, get into the habit of thinking for yourself. That should allow you to see what Hardy really intends. As you do that, you will see your dreams come true.”

“Onesama, why do you hate Her if you understand Her so well?”

“I just dislike her bad habit of collecting people’s souls and displaying them like dolls.”

“As for that habit...” Giselle scratched her head. “Although, it should be okay if the people under her are happy, right?”

“You sound just like a drug peddler. A real and full life is full of hope, but it’s also full of hardship. That is why people are willing to drown themselves in false

happiness even if they know it for what it is. The happiness Hardy offers in her dominion is much the same thing. If you lose yourself in empty joy like that, your soul will gradually wither away.”

“So you’re saying She doesn’t care about them?”

“Thanks to Hardy, all the strong souls are now in her display case, and the rest who go to the Underworld are all a bunch of mooks; won’t this drain the life from the world? That’s why I want to free the souls she’s enslaved someday.”

Rory suspected that Hardy had brought races from other worlds to this one to increase her collection.

“Doesn’t Emroy take the souls of those who die in battle?”

“They can’t be saved once they’re with Hardy!”

“So you think those people in the Underworld are beyond salvation... it’s a difference of opinions, then. In other words, will I have to fight you someday, onesama?”

“I’ll take you on anytime you like. But first, you’re going to clear your debts and learn how to speak with class, OK?”

Giselle could not speak, and she puffed out her cheeks in shame.

“I just don’t know how to speak in your unique way, Onesama.”

There was nothing Giselle could say about her rough way of speech.

Rory also felt that it was pointless, because that was just a part of her personality or temperament. However, not being able to inspire respect when one ought to do so would affect the image of all Apostles in general.

How should I use the carrot and the stick in harmony to help Giselle break through?

As Rory pondered that question, someone called out to her from the entrance of the VIP room.

Looking back, she saw Tuka in stylish clothes and asking, “How do I look?” She was standing with Kuribayashi and Tomita, who were both in civilian attire.

Tuka entered the VIP room like she was a model for the Tokyo Girl's Collection, then turned a circle and struck a pose so Rory could give her opinion.

Rory rested her chin lightly on her fingers, then turned a critical glare on Tuka, scanning her from head to toe.

Her makeup was as light as possible. Tuka's skin had always been very pretty and hardly needed any improvement, but a thin layer of pink lip gloss accentuated Tuka's femininity.

In turn, more work had gone into her hair.

Her hair had originally looked like liquid honey, and it gleamed gold when bathed in light. The ends of her hair were colored a seductive shade of pink.

"What's this?"

Dying all of it would have required a great deal of courage, so she had only done the tips. According to Tuka, she could simply snip the ends off to return to her usual color if she was not happy with it.

"I'm trying to look like a character in the books that Father likes."

In other words, this was cosplay.

Rory went "mhm~" and studied the other details of Tuka's body.

Her nails had been manicured and then painted with nail polish; a pearly pink to match her lips. Her casual shirt was fitted perfectly to her body and highlighted her curves, while the gauzy blouse on top of that only added to her overall gorgeous air.

She was not wearing her usual low-slung jeans either, but an exquisitely-made leather miniskirt.

Below that was a pair of lace stockings. Tuka's slender waist and coltish legs — and especially the obvious garterbelts beneath — perfectly framed her zettai ryouiki and emphasised her sexuality with dazzling brilliance.

This was Tuka's "final decisive battle attire".

"Hm, very good."

Rory gave Tuka a thumbs up.

“Do your best.”

Lelei had turned up at some point, and she looked at Tuka’s attire with a blank look on her face before encouraging her in a monotone. “Also, take this,” she said, as she produced an earring which looked like it had been made of pearly white jade.

“You’re our main fighting power. I look forward to your victory.”

“Umu, you look really good,” Yao agreed. “Anyone who can see this and not react is not a man. Any man would gulp upon seeing this. In fact, he might even jump you on the spot.”

Still, as those words reached their ears, Rory, Tuka and Lelei cast their eyes to the ground in unison.

“That said, I’m still worried about what he thinks.”

“Sometimes, I feel like he’s not interested in women.”

“It’s very worrying.”

As she saw that the others were not reacting as she had expected, Yao frantically tried to cheer them up.

“No... but... what other problems are there? If I were male, and you approached me, Tuka-dono...”

“It would be fine if you were male, but have you ever succeeded before?”

The air around Rory, Tuka and Lelei grew strangely heavy. Yao picked up on it and went quiet as well.

“Uuu... that’s true... I’ve tried all sorts of way to get close, but he hasn’t even held my hand before.”

The closest Yao had gotten to Itami was during their tandem ride on the Wyvern.

Back then, touching him had felt very good. It seemed as though the two of them were very close, and she hoped that things would go further from there. However, not only had they not grown closer after that, but it felt like they had drifted further apart.

If they were allowed to touch a woman's body, surely any man whose thoughts turned towards carnal directions would want to hold her hands and get closer and so on.

"So you're saying he's the slow-burning type? That you need to take your time and get closer to Itami-dono?"

Yao tried to console herself with those thoughts. However, Lelei coldly said:

"There's no time for that."

"Why?" Yao pleaded with Rory, in a tone of voice that said she did not understand.

"Right now, the Gate is of the utmost importance. He might slip away if you wait until the last minute.."

When they agreed to closing the Gate, Itami had been "promised" to stay in the Special Region. In other words, it was a promise made as part of the deal with the Japanese government, and not Itami's own decision. He was a man who worked for his hobbies; if pressed, all he needed to do was say, "no deal, I'm going back" and then flee home.

Naturally, the girls had no intention of letting him go. However, if Itami decided to flee in earnest, even Rory felt uneasy about being able to recapture him.

Therefore, please stay if you want to do so — that was what they felt.

Also, Itami had a reason which made him reluctant to leave: "I want to go to Comiket!" That really pissed the girls off.

"Fine, you two come as well. We're not going to lose to women printed on paper!"

Rory put out her hand face down, and Tuka and Lelei stacked their own hands on top of hers. "Ei, ei, ohhh~!" they cheered. Indeed, this was a battle with their pride as women on the line.

The three of them were willing to shelve their personal desire to win and to monopolize him for the sake of their overall victory.

If the three of them went together, the chances of them being able to

ensnare Itami's heart would be much higher. Details like who would be on top for the time being were not important, because once Itami stayed in the Special Region, the question of who the final victor would be could be solved in time.

Of course, the flipside of that was that if the three of them did not go together, they would lose to drawn girls, which threatened them. Naturally, Itami did not pick up on this.

In any case, Yao — whose status was that of “Itami's possession” — was also feeling uneasy, and she felt a sense of danger that was normally absent. Thus, Yao gradually came to understand the situation. She did not want them to struggle alone; she wanted to help the three of them out as a fourth party.

“Then, instead of such unreliable methods, how about just hiding under his bed and looking for a chance to seduce him?”

Yao said that she was hoping for Lelei to put the MPs on duty to sleep, which would give her a chance to be useful.

However, Rory hmphed at her and said that such thinking was too immature.

“It can't be done, and it's useless anyway. If you do that, he'll hate you.”

Lelei added that if they put the MPs to sleep, it would cause an uproar.

“Also, Father's the kind of person who gets harder to deal with the more you press him. Haven't you realized that yet?”

“Eh... seriously!?”

Lelei had analyzed Itami's tastes from the doujins, light novels and manga which he had bought, and she said.

“After going through the 2478 items of picture books (manga) and art-inserted literature (light novels) which he possesses, I have learned that his tastes tend toward a certain direction. He does not like sexually aggressive females. Therefore, we must probably employ an emotional approach on him. However, that also presents a problem of its own, because an honest expression of emotions usually backfires, as a clumsy approach might appear aggressive and fail to successfully convey one's emotions. In addition, he favors

the stereotype of someone liking another party too much, thus going wild and attempting to dominate the object of his affections. Also, the approach of not being honest but only opening up to the person they like is also a workable approach, but it does not lend itself to swift victories.”

“Eh! No, no way! That would mean I...”

“Yes. it’s very likely that he dislikes you.”

Yao crumpled to her knees after hearing that cruel declaration.

The corollary of that was the fact that she possessed a sexuality that nobody else could match. As Rory secretly basked in her sense of superiority, she smiled coldly and proudly within her heart.

“No, I don’t think there’s any man in this world who dislikes sexiness.”

Perhaps Tuka felt that Yao in despair looked far too pitiful, and had thus decided to comfort her.

“It’s not that you can’t use sex appeal, just that sex appeal by itself won’t work.”

For instance, Delilah, who worked in the cantina, was every bit as alluring as a Warrior Bunny ought to be, but the effect of that was negated by her casual way of speech and her forceful nature, so Itami could relax around her. If she chose that moment to make her move in a gentle and demure way while struggling against her shyness, it would have borne excellent results.

“There’s no point trying to win him over with looks alone. In your case, Yao, you ought to hide your intentions a little better and then casually show off your sexy side when you meet him. That would have been the most effective method, but unfortunately it’s a bit late for that now.”

“I see, so that’s how it is. If only I’d known earlier. Dammit!”

Rory smiled bitterly. After watching how her disciple had collapsed, she said, “it’ll take a while to fix that,” and then left her to her own devices while looking back to Tuka.

“Tuka, what approach are you going to take?”

After that, Tuka produced a slightly-larger-than-average bag. “This.”

“And what is this?”

“Father’s underwear and towels and handmade ben~to♥”

As she said that, Rory flinched like she had been rapped on the head and stumbled several steps back. So she still had that trick up her sleeve.

“Lelei, Youjy said horse-peter food was bad, so I tried cooking something for him. Handmade food ought to be pretty effective, no?”

“I see, so you’re making it with home-cooked flavor, then?”

The flashy packaging, when contrasted with the simple contents, was actually intended to exploit a form of family-oriented gap moe.

“An excellent move. Given the place in which he grew up and his ex-wife, he isn’t used to a family environment. Handmade clothing and cooking... kindness like that ought to score a lot of points with him. And Tuka’s brilliance makes her particularly dazzling.”

The fact was, Itami had never once laid eyes on her body when he was taking care of Tuka as her father. It was their strong bond which had made Itami risk his life against the Flame Dragon.

“Cooking, huh. That’s a bit outside of my field of expertise.”

Rory said that. She could roast things whole, but she was poor at delicate knifework and fine cuisine.

As Lelei heard this, she remembered the scene of how Rory had roasted up a buffalo and a boar.

“It’s a bit hard to call that sort of thing cooking.”

“If you can eat it, it counts! How about you, Lelei?”

“I am very good at it.”

However, in the moment Lelei announced her skill at cooking, someone hmphed and laughed coldly.

“You say that proper nutrition is the important thing and completely disregarded my tastes. You slavishly follow the recipe because you’re not confident in your tongue, so you end up cooking like you’re mixing some kind of

magic medicine. However, you only have three items in your repertoire, so you end up making the same thing every day.”

Kato-sensei suddenly appeared and stood before the two of them, exposing the secret of Lelei’s cooking skills.

Rory imagined how Lelei might approach cooking like she was conducting a magic experiment; weighing out salt and seasonings on both pans of a balance, using an hourglass to calculate cooking time, carefully measuring the quantity of ingredients used, using a beaker to cook sauce and soup, cooking bat wing stew in a witch’s cauldron, adding things that looked like carbonized salamanders into the pot one by one before using a thick pestle to stir a mysterious mixture that bubbled ominously.

“Well, you can make something edible that way.”

“Of course. I tried it out with you, Sensei.”

“Oh, it’s edible, all right. But I guarantee you’ll get sick of it in four days and experience physical pain when you see it after twelve. Frankly speaking, I don’t want to go back to Coda Village any more; living with this girl again is just too miserable. I guess I’m used to the delicious food here.”

He had always been the one to dump everything on her and run off by himself, and to think he was acting all mentor-like now... annoyed, Lelei compressed air into a ball and launched it at him.

However, unlike an average senior citizen, Kato-sensei evaded it with the grace of a mosquito and muttered, “A textbook attack. But as a result, it’s also easily predicted.”

“If the recipes lack in variety, I’ll just learn more of them.”

Lelei gathered her strength and prepared to toss a second airball.

“To think that the girl who once said time spent on cooking was wasted and all that mattered was proper nutrition would be talking like this. Does love change a girl so much?”

“Uuu... what’s wrong with a change like that!? I don’t want to hear that from an adult like you, Sensei!” Lelei said as she fired another airball.

“Mm, I see it. Take this!”

Kato swung his staff and batted the airball back, which flew past Lelei’s ear with a

whoosh

. It flew out the door of the cantina and towards parts unknown.

“Hmph. So that’s what they call a Homuran.”

(TL Note: “home run”)

She could not help but ask what Kato, who should have been cooped up in a lab, was doing here.

“Is the lab my cage? You dumped all the work of educating the kids onto me while you ran off to have fun with work, exploring and men! Who are you to lecture me about that sort of thing! I ended up having to be their playmate. That gave me a chance to come into contact with Japan’s “animay”, “geimu” and “spotsu”.”

After saying so, Kato laughed, “Hahahaha, you need to train more” before leaving with a full bottle of alcohol from the head chef.

Behind him, Lelei shook her head furiously in embarrassed denial.

On the other hand, Yao had barely managed to recover from her previous damage, and she decided to keep her distance from the others lest she be wounded by the conversation again. Kuribayashi and Tomita approached to greet her.

“It’s rare to see you in plain clothes. Are the two of you going out, Kuribayashi-dono and Tomita-dono?”

“Yup, I need to bring Tomita to where the el-tee is. Tuka will be along for the ride.”

Kuribayashi had a PDW concealed under her clothes, an FN P90. At a glance, she looked like she was pointing its barrel at Tomita.

“Tomita-dono, you’re visiting Itamy-dono? Are you on a mission?”

“Mhm. This fellow recently tripped a death flag, and if this goes on, everyone’s worried that he’ll stumble on a rock and die or something. Therefore, he needs to see the el-tee to reset the flag.”

Tomita immediately protested in a very embarrassed way.

“It’s nothing! I told you it was nothing, right? Besides, can we really do something about it if we visit the el-tee?”

“Of course we can! I heard about it from the el-tee, and so after learning the specifics, we’re going to push the bad luck to the el-tee and let him bear it for us.”

“Push, push it to him?”

Sweat beaded on Tomita’s forehead as he heard Kuribayashi’s words.

“Is, isn’t that really bad? Could you tell me in detail what exactly we have to do to shift away the bad luck?”

And so Rory briefly explained the ritual for avoiding disaster.

“Youji will raise a death flag in front of Tomita, and so the bad luck will transfer to Youji.”

As an Apostle of a dark god, Itami raising death flags was a good thing for her.

“Have, have you told the el-tee about dumping the bad luck onto him?”

“If you don’t like that, then you’ll just have to get married ahead of time, Tomita. If you get married before you die, the flag won’t get tripped, which ought to work for negating it, right?”

Kuribayashi looked at Rory for confirmation, and Rory nodded.

“But Bozes is in Italica now! We can’t get married right away! Besides, what kind of marriage ceremony would take place between me and an Imperial citizen?”

Kuribayashi nervously replied to Tomita.

“It, it can’t be helped, so just put me down as your wife for now. Let me make this clear, I’m doing this for your safety. It, it’s not like I really want to marry you or anything.”

Kuribayashi produced a stack of marriage forms with her chop on it. Her face was red for some reason.

“We, we can’t! I want to marry Bozes, how can I do that if I get married to you now?”

“Tch, so it won’t work, huh?”

“Of course not!”

Kuribayashi clicked her tongue like a child who had been caught in a prank, and she folded the critical marriage forms back into her pocket. Given how she was acting, she had not yet given up on using those forms yet, but was just waiting for another chance to bring them into play.

“Then all you can do is look up the el-tee and have him take on your death flag for you.”

Tuka, Lelei and Yao were unable to connect death and marriage, and so they went “What are you saying?” as they asked Kuribayashi to explain.

“Soldiers who say, ‘I’ll go home and get married after the war’ or ‘my kid’s about to be born’ before battle are guaranteed to die on the battlefield. Same thing goes for people who say, ‘I’ll handle this, you go on ahead without me’.”

Yao put her hand on the protective talisman hanging over her chest, saying “Sounds like what they call a ‘jinx’... I guess this is very important.” After that, she added, “That’s why I work to strengthen my talisman every day,” explaining her daily preparations. To be precise, she used several 500 yen coins in that capacity.

Lelei said, “We’re already spent the three days and nights together, so we’re already married. There’s no point saying we’ll get married again,” before pursing her lips. However, for some reason, everyone ignored her words.

Tuka’s face was pale as she said, “Father’s going to raise a death flag... what should I do?” After that, Kuribayashi tugged on Rory’s sleeve and quietly asked:

“Eh, is it going to be alright?”

And so Rory replied, like she was comforting a spoiled child:

“Well, from the perspective of an Apostle of Emroy, death flags and whatnot

are nothing to fear. Viewed from a different angle, this is actually an amazing chance.”

“What do you mean?”

“When it comes to marriage... well, remarriage or whatever, given the way Youjy hasn’t even given the matter any consideration, if we got him to say ‘we’ll get married after this war’ or something, even if it was a lie, don’t you think we’d get a chance to become closer to him?”

“Oh really?” Tuka mumbled.

“You have to build up to it. Still, even a little bit can eventually give you a chance.”

“Still, Father will be in danger if he says something like that.”

“It’ll be fine. Youjy is just like what his men think of him; he avoids the battlefield and hides in his bunk to sleep, he talks all sorts of nonsense without thinking, so eventually he’ll say something like ‘I’m getting married after this war’.”

Tuka turned to look at Tomita, and Tomita replied, “I, I guess that’s true.”

“Provided they’re not too scummy, people will be bound even by the lies they speak. Since Youjy’s not scum, he’ll mean those words. Plus, sometimes a lie gives rise to truth, no?”

Tuka nodded vigorously once she parsed those words. Even if Itami lied, the important thing was that he understood the meaning of those words, and Tuka muttered “making a truth out of a lie” to herself.

Lelei overheard them and said, “That reasoning is flawed. Since the three-night ritual has already been completed, there’s no point in him declaring that he’ll get married. You won’t trip a death flag.” However, she was ignored again.

While Lelei was as expressionless as always, there was an aura of dissatisfaction radiating from her.

Kuribayashi glanced at her watch and said, “We ought to be heading out now.”

“In any case, wish us luck in getting to the el-tee!” Kuribayashi turned to Rory

and pressed her hands together with a clap.

Tomita saw her and clapped his hands together before Rory as well, muttering, “Please let me marry Bozes.” What was this death flag anyway? He looked like he did not really mind, but he also seemed a little bothered by it.

“No matter how many times you do it, I’m just not used to that ritual of yours.”

(TL Note: Clapping your hands together in prayer is a common practice in Japanese Shinto.)

While it felt kind of good, Rory still had a bitter smile on her face as she accepted their prayers and then pushed their hands back to them.

“A warrior evades any danger he senses, in order to fight until the bitter end.”

After everyone left, only Lelei remained in the cantina’s VIP room.

Hardly anyone was left in the cantina after the peak periods were over. Also, since the VIP rooms were at the back of the cantina, no noise reached it, and so it was very quiet. From a literary point of view, this was the ideal environment for writing a light novel.

Lelei spread a huge array of documents on the table, compared the differences between them, then erased and wrote, wrote and erased.

Lelei was commonly seen facing books and documents in Arnus.

She gave the impression of being someone who holed up in a lab and read in silence. In truth, she preferred to read outdoors, rather than behind a desk.

Still, she sighed quietly and scratched her head, which was quite a rare sight. It would seem she had gone to a great deal of effort to solve a tough problem.

No matter how many times she tried, the numbers simply did not add up. Lelei put several pebbles into a groove, which served as the Special Region’s equivalent of a primitive abacus, and then slid the pebbles around with her fingertips.

“You look like you’re having a hard time.”

The head chef stood before Lelei and placed a piping hot cup of fragrant tea before her. Wisps of steam curled above the white porcelain cup, which was filled with a pale yellow translucent liquid.

“There’s a mountain of problems and I can’t solve them all.”

“Thinking of how to convince everyone? Maybe you’d be more relaxed if we didn’t have to close the Gate.”

“It can’t be helped. Otherwise things will just get worse.”

“Still, it won’t get worse today or tomorrow, right? You don’t need to force yourself to think so hard, no? Everyone hates that sort of thing.”

“That would be a mistake. Delaying would only make the situation worse.”

“So you need to do the right thing right now?”

“No. What people dislike is not the closing of the Gate, but how their lives will change after the closing of the Gate. Therefore, what I should be thinking about is how to keep their lives unaffected.”

“Is that possible?”

Lelei had been sipping the tea as she chatted with the head chef, and she replied, “I have a rough idea” as she indicated the densely-packed characters in front of her.

“The plan is to recruit pioneers and found a new village, and then each village will build a separate town like this around themselves. This will create jobs. If each town functions like Arnus Town, then we can continue living like this.”

“So you mean you can go everywhere and build towns and villages like Arnus? A town that we build and which belongs to us? Will Nihon allow us to do all that?”

“They will. Under the agreement, Arnus and its surroundings are the equivalent of a self-governing territory equivalent to a “province” in Japan. The Japanese system of governance is to have a Japanese citizen act as a representative, and then have more representatives perform the functions of government. Since we live here and have Japanese citizenship, the disposition of Arnus will be entirely up to us.”

“Ehhhh!?! Is that any different from Nihon sending a manager, overseer or lord to rule us?”

“They’ll send a governor over at first. But they’re now saying that they want to transition to a model like what I described in future.”

“That’s impossible, there’s no way. Besides, how are we going to build replacements for the village and the town!?”

“In the first place, the ALC only exists in order to rebuild Coda Village. All we need to do is expand the scope of its operations. We might not have enough funds, but if we ration our budget, it’s not impossible. Our residents come from all sorts of races, so many species will show interest in this place, such as Dwarves, Sirens, Elves, Catpeople, Warrior Bunnies, and the like. Of course, there will be humans too. The next step will then be to put it into practice. That way, we can convince everyone, even without the Gate. It will not be easy, but it will definitely be worthwhile.”

“...This is the first time I’ve heard of this. Isn’t it a bit too early to be talking about such things?”

“We’re ironing out the details with Japan. Indeed, we cannot say it has been decided yet, so we have kept quiet about it to avoid giving people false hope.”

“Still, there’s no way it’ll go that smoothly, right? When you get down to it, such a wonderful thing will draw wicked people over and they’ll mess things up, no? And besides, Arnus isn’t that diverse, right!? Plus, if something unexpected happens, things won’t necessarily go the way you imagine.”

The head chef shook his head over and over, and he muttered repeatedly, “It won’t succeed so easily.”

He resembled a rookie merchant who could not understand a sales pitch about making big money, and had thus rejected the whole thing as a con game.

If he were an average consumer seeking not to be tricked by a scam, that would be an appropriate response.

However, the fact that he had completely rejected even the possibility of making money and refused to even listen to it meant that he had failed as a businessman. Besides, this was not just buying and selling, but deciding his own

future. Blocking it out just because he did not understand it was the same as giving up his right to make decisions. In other words, he would be a puppet dancing on someone else's strings.

Of course, that was not simply the head chef's fault.

The scale of what Lelei described was far too great for the average resident of the Special Region to understand. Just as Lelei herself had said, she had to understand and discuss it with others, and then tailor her explanation so that her audience would understand.

"It is because of the Gate. Once the Gate closes, we will need a firm foundation. This is linked to the plan for handling the refugees from the recent wars, and so it should be easy to get approval for it."

However, Lelei being Lelei, she had the bad habit of oversimplifying. Before those of slower minds could catch up, she had already jumped to the next topic.

"...Oh yes, what's this? It's the first time I've drunk it."

"This, this is a herb called Naruko. It seems to be a rare import from the plains in the Far North. Travelling merchants brought some with them, so I tried buying some. How does it taste?"

"Naruko? Never heard of it before."

Lelei nodded and took another mouthful.

"It tastes and smells good."

This was a very uncommon expression to see on Lelei's face.

"I'm glad you like it. So there were things even you didn't know, Lelei-san. If you did, I'd get chills down my spine. For instance, the fact that Naruko tea puts its drinkers to sleep."

The cup rolled to the ground and Lelei collapsed on the table. The floor and documents were stained by the Naruko tea, staining them a pale green.

"Seems quite effective too."

The sound of footsteps on the floorboards drew closer, and three shadows loomed over Lelei as she snored quietly.

“Is this the girl? I thought she was some kind of superheroine from the rumors, but to think this was all. I’m a little disappointed.”

“Still, Metmes-dono, she ought to be one of the heroes who defeated the Flame Dragon.”

As Panache explained as much to Diabo, who was pretending to be a servant, she tied up Lelei with practiced movements and gagged her.

One could not simply tie her up tight; she had to carefully consider how to keep her circulation flowing. Also, perhaps it was because Panache was also a woman, she took care not to let the hems of Lelei’s dress ride up and expose her.

“Indeed. Planning to found a nation of her own on this land is quite a brave thing... ah, no, it’s awe-inspiring.”

While Metmes the attendant was filled with respect for her, Diabo simply dismissed it with a “hmph” and walked away. Diabo still felt that Lelei’s spiel was delusional and laughable.

Without the Gate, there could be no business with Japan. The market would shrink and everyone would be demoralized. The thought of trying to found new towns and villages in such conditions and build a better life for everyone would only serve to depress them further.

“If we had not met in this way, I would like to have talked to this girl about matters of governance.”

“Anyone with the title of Sage at her age could be regarded as the backbone of the Empire. Do you think there’s still time?”

Panache was lightly hinting that this was their last chance to turn back from this path. However, Diabo was unmoved.

“No, this is the only path left to us.”

The head chef took out a wooden case that was 1.5 meters on a side, which was stuffed with polystyrene packing peanuts as cushioning.

Diabo wanted to give Panache a hand, but Panache refused. Her reasoning was that it was best to not have a man touch her.

His face seemed to say, “What, you don’t want me to touch another woman? She’s just a girl,” but after seeing Panache glare at him, he said, “Fine, you handle it,” and drew his hand back.

Panache placed Lelei into the fetal position, putting her in the box like she was a piece of fragile porcelain. She put her mage’s staff diagonally across her, so it would be covered by the cushioning material.

The head chef put a lid on the box and began nailing it shut. However, Diabo suddenly said “wait” and stopped the head chef.

“Can air get in once you put the lid on it? We’re done for if she suffocates in there.”

“There’s no need to worry, attendant-san. Look at how many holes there are in the box. It’ll be fine.”

In truth, the crate had been crudely made, and the cuts were rough around the edges. The gaps between the boards were almost a centimeter wide, and in order to cover those holes up, the head chef had covered it in labels such as “Fragile”, “This Side Up”, “Do Not Hand-Carry”, “Do Not Get Wet” and the like.

“Is that so, I understand. Let me put the lid on it. You go do what you have to do.”

“Understood, Metmes-san. I’ll take care of the rest. Let me do the cleanup here.”

And so, the head chef handed the hammer and nails to Diabo, and returned to the shop area out front.

Diabo let Metmes handle the work, then stood behind the head chef with Panache. The head chef suddenly produced a document from a cupboard and handed it to Meia.

This was a return form used to send back goods from the PX. The receiver was a Japanese company authorized to ship goods to the ALC. Since it was returned by the PX, it would not be inspected when passing through the Gate. It showed how much trust they had in the ALC.

“Here’s a return form. Sign it.”

Meia looked puzzled. She looked like she wanted to cry and laugh and also seemed miserable.

“Are you really going to do it ~nya?”

“You know there’s no turning back, right? You need to send it before they close the Gate. That way you won’t be parted from the man you love. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Mm... but repaying her kindness like this is terrible ~nya.”

“Why do you say that? This is to protect Lelei-san too. Zorzal will have his sights set on Lelei-san. So we need to hide her, right? This way, nobody will know where she is.”

“But do we have to ship her back to Japan like luggage ~nya?”

And so, Diabo whispered into Meia’s ear like he was seducing her.

“There are no more safe places here. Have you heard of The Piper? Apparently he was an assassin hired by Zorzal, and even Itamy the Dragonslayer couldn’t do anything about him. What if Zorzal hired him again? I doubt they could avoid him a second time. But if he had to pass through the strictly managed Gate, even Zorzal would be powerless to harm her. Wouldn’t she be safe that way?”

“Even so, if we just explained it all to Lelei...”

“Then we wouldn’t be able to keep the Gate from closing, no?” the head chef replied.

“That’s why we’re doing this. We can both protect Lelei and keep the Gate open, killing two birds with one stone. This is the time to take responsibility and repay the kindness we’ve received. Indeed, it might upset your conscience, but they’ll thank you for it someday. So come on, help us out.”

After the head chef’s lecture, Meia began moving again, like she had been defrosted.

It still bothered her. However, after being persuaded by the two of them, she gingerly reached out and signed the document with shaky hands. After it was done, she collapsed onto the counter.

“That settles it. Now we’ll contact Chyna,” Diabo said as he took a cell phone from his pocket.

“Should I press here, or there...” He fumbled with it several times.

After that, a voice said, “Are you through? Alright, speak,” and then he pressed it to Panache’s ear.

“Attendant-dono, it’s the other way round.”

After she pointed it out, Diabo hurriedly turned it the right way up and said, “I knew that.”

Panache took a deep breath, and then spoke to the person on the other side with the Japanese she had learned.

“I am Diabo-denka’s representative. The Jade Wall is packed. I repeat, the package is packed. As we agreed, we will send it through on a marked cargo wagon.”

As the head chef heard Panache speak, he thought about how China would receive the goods in question, and so he quietly asked Diabo:

“Won’t she end up somewhere else if we send her that way? This sounds like a big problem to me; how are you going to deliver her to them?”

“It’s very common to have cargo wagons robbed along the way by bandits, although I don’t know if the same thing applies on the other side of the Gate...”

The head chef accepted that explanation with an “I see.”

“Still, there’s a live person inside. Please be gentle with it.”

“Understood. I never had any intention of harming that girl, so I’ll make sure they get the message.”

Just then, Metmes brought a pushcart stacked with crates over, and Diabo smiled to him in secret.

Traffic between Japan and the Special Region was strictly regulated, so neither the Japanese nor the natives of the Special Region could come and go as

they pleased. However, the fact there were many JSDF personnel dispatched to and stationed at Arnus meant that traffic was smooth, and many exceptions to the rules had been permitted.

For instance, the servicemen of the JSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force were allowed to visit Ginza while on leave, and they then dispersed to their various destinations from Ginza. Their work system was such that they always needed to have someone on station in case of an emergency, so there would be people performing missions every day as well as people taking leave every day, which resulted in an endless stream of people passing through the Gate every day.

In addition, the logistics teams of the JGSDF moved back and forth every day.

Modern mechanized warfare demanded a great deal of resources.

Every fighting man consumed 2.7 kilograms of food and 9 liters of water a day. In addition, they would need 90 to 100 kilograms of fuel and ammunition. 10'000 men would require 1'000 tonnes of supplies to fight for one day (60% of which was fuel). Thus, there was a long line of large trucks waiting outside the Gate every day. This took a great toll on Ginza, which relied heavily on foot traffic for business, and it caused a lot of traffic jams.

In addition, permission had been granted to civilian shipping firms to move goods in and out of the Ginza Garrison, so each man's personal items and the inventory of the ALC's shops were all handled by these companies.

Of course, civilians could only approach the dome which surrounded the Gate, and they were forbidden from taking a single step through it. Their goods would be laid on a platform within the dome and opened up in a cordoned-off area, and all sorts of checks performed on them. It was only then that they would be allowed through the Gate and sent to the ALC's storehouses.

However, the return journey was different. Wrongly shipped items would be allowed through the Gate as long as one could produce an inspection voucher and then loaded onto a civilian shipping firm's trucks within the dome.

After passing through the Gate, Tuka and the others stood in line as they completed various procedures. All manner of trucks waited on the platform behind the barricade, and pallets laden with all sorts of cargo were steadily

loaded onto them.

A neverending stream of PX crates came from behind Tuka, loaded onto a truck with a miniature forklift. However, the corners of the crates were constantly bumped back and forth, and the rough handling they received was very obvious, and so Tuka shouted:

“Please move the cargo carefully! It says ‘Fragile’ on it!”

However, her voice could not carry past the barricade within the dome, which resounded with the noise of trucks. The driver continued to load the cargo in a careless way. Frustrated, Tuka used her spirit magic to summon an invisible wind tunnel, and then shouted at the driver again.

“Take more care in moving the cargo!”

As the shout reached his ear, the driver gulped in an exaggerated fashion, and he turned back to look for the source of the sound.

“If it gets damaged while shipping, we’ll have to write it off as a loss! So please be more careful when moving the boxes!”

The driver looked visibly confused and looked all around, but he could not find the source of the female voice castigating him.

“Over here, over here.”

Soon, he saw Tuka in the distance, standing with her hands on her hips with a stern look on her face.

The driver’s expression seemed to say “No way!?” but when he met Tuka’s eyes, she repeated, “Yes, you, I’m watching you, so you’d better work hard!” The driver bowed in apology and waved to indicate that he understood.

“Next up, number 23, Tuka-san~ it’s your turn!”

After Kuribayashi was done with her immigration, the female official called Tuka’s name and queue number.

After cautioning him to be more careful another one or two times, Tuka hurriedly ran over to the counter while saying, “Ah, yes!”

The uniformed servicewoman asked several boilerplate questions.

Have you been sick recently? Do you feel warm? Does your luggage conform to Japanese law? Are you carrying any drugs, bladed objects and the like? They were all along those lines.

Tuka replied “no” to all of them in fluent Japanese, and signed on the confirmation form. And so, the servicewoman handed Tuka a document, which she stamped in bright red ink.

After her were Kuribayashi and Tomita, who were not questioned and permitted to carry weapons because they were bodyguards. After the security personnel saw their documents, they bowed to indicate that they could pass.

“All the best, Tuka-san.”

And so the three of them entered Ginza.

As a resident of the Special Region, Tuka had successfully obtained a visa because she was one of the leading members of the ALC and thus received exceptional treatment. As one of the negotiators with Japan, Prime Minister Morita had personally given her his permission. In addition, the girls were accorded other privileges, such as this.

“I’ll be in your care today too.”

As usual, Tuka moved with Kuribayashi, waiting for the stationwagon that would carry them.

Soon, a vehicle with a black-suited driver pulled up, to ensure her safety, maintain secrecy and so forth.

However, there was someone else in the seat beside the driver’s, and he waved to Tuka.

“Ah, isn’t that Komakado-san?”

“Good morning, Tuka... san. You look beautiful today.”

The man beside the driver was Komakado. Both he and the black-suited driver beside him had their souls stolen away at a mere glance at Tuka, and their faces went red to the tips of their ears.

“Good morning? Has there been a time lapse? What time is it here?”

“Forgive me. Right now, both ‘good morning’ and good day’ are applicable forms of greeting. Was it afternoon in the Special Region?”

“Yes. What’s the occasion today? Why did you have to come all the way down to fetch us in person, Gomagado?”

“There’s been a bit of a ruckus in Ginza, so I came over myself.”

Komakado and the driver started the engine, and Tuka pressed her chin to the window, anxious to see what was outside.

Many people were massed along the fence around the Ginza garrison. At a glance, some of them were wearing T-shirts, with slogans reading:

“The Japanese government should compensate the foreign victims of the Ginza Incident!”

“Don’t close the Gate, open the frontier to us!”

“Hand the Special Region over to the international community!”

“Obey the Space Treaty!”

“Don’t destroy the Special Region’s environment!”

There was even a placard saying, “Stop killing the dolphins and whales, Japan!”

Of course, Tuka could not read any of those characters.

“What are they saying? Is this some sort of religious activity?”

“It’s called a demonstration. In democratic societies, people are allowed to gather together and express their displeasure towards the government and speak their demands.”

One of the police officers nearby shouted, “Please don’t stop” over a megaphone as he directed traffic.

The demonstrators remained orderly, like they were entering a stadium.

Komakado furrowed his brows with a “hm” as he saw this. Something was eating at him.

However, the unnatural fragrance of cosmetics and Tuka’s question of “won’t

this turn violent?” took the edge off his ferocious mood.

“There haven’t been many of those in Japan recently. In the past, there were all sorts of people who said that they were striking against the government, but they ended up flipping the cars of people in weak positions like themselves. There were also others who destroyed shops to the point where they couldn’t do business at all, but those are rare now. There were riots overseas as well, with people burning and trampling on the flags of the countries they were protesting, like the riots in the UK and France.”

“How savage. Do you have such Goblin-like people among you?”

“Humans can fall very easily. If we’re not careful, we’ll reach their standard in no time.

Tuka did not seem to care much about that. She hummed to herself and looked elsewhere. Komakado ordered the driver to “carry on as usual”.

The police stopped the flow of traffic at the entrance for a brief moment, allowing the car with Tuka and the others to leave the roads around the Ginza Garrison.

Usually, they would be able to follow the flow of traffic out of Ginza. However, they could not do that today. That was because there was a long line of protesters, which jammed up traffic. There were several large trucks behind the car and their drivers had annoyed looks on their faces.

Tuka suddenly thought of something.

“I always thought the people of Nihon had black hair and the same skin color, but surprisingly enough, there’s all sorts of colors here.”

From the car window, one could see white and black people as well as Asians in a truly international palette. Naturally, Asians still made up the majority, but that simply made the differently-colored people that much more obvious.

“This demonstration is largely composed of people from international non-government organisations (NGOs). Although the organizers were originally from Japan for the most part, China, Korea, France, the UK, America, Russia and many others stepped in to join them, and so things ended up like this... which is why I’m running an errand here and in a situation like this.”

“I see. Thank you.”

The demonstrators carried flags of all kinds. Some were red, some were white, some were red and white-striped with a patch of white-starred blue on them, and so on.

“Oh, right. The red flags are from China, that one’s from Korea, the one with stars and stripes is from America, and then that’s France and the UK and Russia.”

“Won’t foreigners making a ruckus in another country cause problems?”

“Ah... as long as they don’t break the law. For instance, when the UN has international conferences, there are always NGOs gathering and demonstrating.”

“Really?”

Tuka knew nothing about Japan, and to her it was nothing short of surprising that Japan would allow foreigners to come over and conduct demonstrations.

“Still, their discipline looks like an army.”

As he heard Tuka’s opinion, Komokado finally realized the source of his earlier sense of foreboding.

She was right. The foreigners taking part in the protest might have called themselves an international NGO, but their control was a little unnatural. Without a commander to direct them, they would not be acting like this. “They look like an army...” Tuka’s opinion perfectly conveyed what Komakado felt.

A sense of unease went through Komakado, and he ordered the driver to leave the scene as soon as possible.

“Oi, make a U-turn here to the other lane.”

However, the hitherto silent driver in black expressed his doubts about that order.

“We can’t make a U-turn here.”

“Doesn’t matter, our guest’s safety is our number one priority, now do it!”

“But if we cut into the oncoming traffic like that, we might cause an accident.”

The other lane was also jammed up, and if they forced their way in, it would surely result in a car accident, so it was only natural for the driver to hesitate. However, in the space of a few seconds, a commotion suddenly spread through the crowd which had originally been milling around.

“Eh, eh! Wait, something’s weird, what, what, what’s happening?” Tuka exclaimed as she looked out the window.

A group of NGO demonstrators which had originally been neatly lined up suddenly broke through the police cordon and rushed out to disrupt the convoy.

They ran between the limousine and the trucks, paralyzing the already-jammed traffic.

The police blew loudly on their whistles, but the demonstrators replied with loud shouts as well.

However, so many things were occurring in so many places at once that they could not deal with them, and even the police ended up being cordoned into a mass.

This was an attack

. With that thought in mind, Kuribayashi and Tomita reflexively raised their guns. However, Komakado told them to take their finger off their triggers.

“This isn’t the Special Region, please switch your brains back to normal mode!”

This riot — or rather, this disturbance — was rapidly spreading in size. Even the typically calm Tomita muttered, “So what are we going to do if we can’t shoot?” The demonstrators ran up to the cargo racks on the trucks and threw the stacked crates to the road, then proceeded to tear the contents out in a decidedly illegal manner.

“Are they trying to plunder the convoy!?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Komakado shot down the driver’s question. Indeed, it looked like undirected violence, but in his eyes, the violence of these demonstrators was not totally

uncoordinated.

It was a fact that a lot of shopfronts along Ginza had their windows smashed in and some of their goods taken. Since Ginza was home to many shops selling high-value products, the damage was tremendous. But if one looked carefully, such plunderers were only part of the disruptive demonstrators; the core group was still operating under careful regulation. The commanded groups smashed the truck windows, pulled the drivers out, and began searching through the cargo racks.

“Those guys look like they’re looking for something.”

The driver in black seemed to have realised it as well.

“I see...”

A man finished searching the cargo of one of the trucks and then shouted while pointing at the next truck. After that, a group of men ran over and surrounded the truck in an instant.

“What are those guys looking for?”

“I don’t know, only that staying here isn’t good.”

Komakado judged that they had to leave this place no matter what.

He reached under his seat and took out the red signal flare that was always there, then turned back to look at the back seat.

“Alright, prepare to move. When I light this flare, the vehicle will fill with smoke. When that happens, we’ll run out at once. Once the smoke starts spilling out, they’ll probably think the vehicle’s on fire and back off, so we’ll use that chance to get out. Kuribayashi, Tomita, take care of Tuka. I can’t keep up with this waist of mine, so you guys go first. We’ll meet at... yes, we’ll meet at the Shibuya police station. That’s the plan!”

“Roger!”

Kuribayashi and Tomiya considered that letting the others see the weapons they were holding would only make things more dangerous, so they put their weapons back into their bags. “Get ready,” Komakado said as he lit the flare.

“Eh, that’s...”

Just as the smoke filled the vehicle, Tuka saw the crate from earlier being taken off the truck bed. It was plastered with stickers reading “Fragile” and “This Side Up”. If they had just tossed it to the ground, they might have broken the contents, but for some reason the rioters were being extremely careful with it.

“Wait, ah, they’re taking it! The crate from the ALC!”

Tuka unconsciously raised her voice just as the acrid smoke clouded her vision, and they could not see what happened to the crate after that.

“Go go go!”

The pedestrians saw white smoke spilling out of the stationwagon in front of them, and they backed away for fear it might explode.

Kuribayashi and Tuka took the chance to open the door and alight from the vehicle.

There was no reasoning with an angry mob. Amidst this surge of violence that sought only to ensnare more victims within itself, the surrounding men locked onto the two of them and reached out their lewd hands. Tomita received a beating as he tried to break out of the chaotic circumstances.

However, Tomita did not shrink from them. He crossed his arms in front of himself and bulldozed a path for Kuribayashi and Tuka to follow.

Kuribayashi dropped a man trying to grab her from behind with a roundhouse kick and shouted:

“Are we going!? Tomita!?”

“You two think of something, I’ll keep pushing on here! Uoooooooooh!”

Tomita stood in front of the two of them, and he shoved the crowd away as he pressed forward.

“I was waiting for you to say that! I wanted to see you like this!”

Kuribayashi shouted happily, and Tuka ran on in the shadow of his massive body.



Chapter 2

After the departure of the anti-Zorzal Alliance, Italica was exceptionally quiet.

The only other people who remained on the Count's domain besides the personal staff of House Formal were various demihumans and Pina's knight band. They were the foundation of the regular government's forces, and when they had first come here, their ordered steps had raised the spirits of all Italica.

However, their morale now was at rock bottom, and a slack mood filled the air.

The troops were not motivated.

The morning mist had not yet cleared, and while the sentries on the wall handed their duties over to the next shift, what drove them was not fighting spirit, but a form of habitual inertia. Even a boulder rolled down from the top of a steep cliff would eventually lose its momentum and grind to a halt once it reached flat ground. Similarly, the inertia that drove the troops had come to an end, and all that remained was the feeling that "we had once been a military camp". The citizens of Italica had watched the entire process with their own eyes.

The leader of the White Rose Knights, Beefeater, sighed.

"It's only when we meet difficulty that they say, 'the age of demihumans has begun', 'demihumans are going to rise in status' and other kinds of sucking up. What kind of shameless two-faced crap is this, anyway?"

Once, the nobles of the pro-peace faction — which had voiced their support for the Empire's legitimate government — had been frustrated by their lack of manpower.

Thus, they had sent emissaries to their vassal nations and foreign countries to seek aid, but they had not received an answer which pleased them. Even scum like bandits and deserters paid them no heed. That was how bad things had been back then.

Therefore, they decided to swallow their pride and ask the demihuman tribes for help, in exchange for improving their position in Imperial society.

Specifically, they would elevate the upper echelons of the tribes to Imperial nobility, naming them as counts and viscounts, and have them fill missing positions among the senators.

In short, they would welcome these outsiders to the Imperial chain of command... well, to put it in a nicer, this was a change in policy. They would treat these guests of the Empire as one of them, deal evenly with them, and give them a say in the Empire's future.

The demihumans would also be invited to take part in the national economy, which had hitherto treated them as outsiders, and when they considered that point, they found it agreeable. And so, the legitimate government's forces were bolstered by soldiers from 54 demihuman tribes.

However, things had changed.

Ever since the reinforcements from the foreign countries and the vassal kingdoms had arrived, there were more than enough human mercenaries, and there had been a huge shift in the nobles' attitudes.

In other words, all the positions earmarked for capable demihumans had instead been given to human officers and officials, and once the war began, they said, "your services are no longer required" and left the demihumans behind.

Of course, they had not actually said something so shameless.

Pina had also told the people around her that "only those who were willing to lend their aid in their hour of need deserve to protect His Majesty" in order to keep their morale up.

"Someday, we will be called upon to make war. Let the others take care of the straggler troops; we need to hone ourselves in preparation for that day."

Those words rallied the men, who were on the verge of drifting apart like scattered sand.

Of course, all they heard was news of the legitimate army's smashing

successes. There did not seem to be any way the coalition forces, with the JSDF at their core, would ever be placed in peril. Nobody could imagine Italica being in any danger.

When the demihuman troops realised that the great battle of which Pina spoke did not exist, they grew despondent, saying, “What did we even come here for?” followed by, “I knew this would happen. Those bastards from the legitimate government pulled a fast one on us” and other such defeatist talk.

Neither was it only the demihumans who were complaining. Even some of Pina’s knights felt the same way.

In their eyes, they were Pina’s swords, the Emperor’s shields, and the heart of the legitimate government’s army. Anyone who prided themselves on such things would surely be unhappy to be excluded from critical battles. The words that had accidentally slipped from Beefeater’s mouth spoke for everyone in her unit.

“You’re right to feel that way, and I understand how you feel, but you mustn’t say this anywhere else..”

Bozes, who had received command authority for the knights, ate a mandarin orange as she cautioned the subordinate who was also her friend. Due to Beefeater’s high rank, if she began expressing displeasure, her men would not only indicate their displeasure with their words, but with their attitudes as well.

Naturally, Beefeater said, “I know,” and then she nodded before falling silent.

She did not want to cause a stir or anything. All she wanted to do was see if she was the only one who thought that way. Hearing Bozes say, “you’re right, and I understand you” was enough for her.

“Also, when her Highness said “someday we will be called upon to make war”, I didn’t think she was saying so without any basis for it. She must have something in mind.

“I can’t believe that. And I’m not great enough to convince others to believe in something I can’t even accept.”

“Still, I know in my heart that her Highness’ words are true. Therefore, don’t relax. Keep the men on their toes.”

“Tch... I got it. Honestly...”

Beefeater twirled a stray strand of hair at the back of her neck around an index finger, and after bowing to Bozes she left the latter’s office.

Similar talk was breaking out among the various tribes left behind in Italica. Then, there were the rare few principled soldiers who were immersing themselves in their daily tasks.

Finally, their hard work was rewarded.

The Six-Arms and Hobbit soldiers galloped back on their horses with all due haste.

“It, it’s terrible! It’s the enemy!”

The Dark Elf watch commander snorted as he heard this.

“How could that be!? Are you dreaming? Even if there were enemies, they’d be far in the east. Why would the enemy show up here?”

However, the Six-Arms soldier frantically waved his arms about and shouted.

“We’ll accept any kind of punishment if we’re wrong! Please send troops out to verify it!”

After saying so much, there was no way to pretend he had not heard this. After hearing this, the Dark Elf watch commander still had his doubts, but he still sent Wolf Beastmen, renowned for their daring, to reconnoiter the situation.

“Well, that’s how it is. I’m counting on you now.”

“Alright, alright. It must be hard on you too, boss.”

After that, he saw the Wolfman scouts he sent out sprinting back like they were about to keel over before they reported sighting the enemy.

Italica was immediately plunged into chaos.

Pina simply replied, “As expected,” and she ordered Bozes to send powerful scout officers in the direction of the enemy.

According to the men, they spotted what looked like enemy sentries, and there was insufficient information to determine their aim or their numbers. And

then, she received a report that there were almost 10'000 Imperial legionnaires advancing on them, flying Zorzal's flag.

"Is Nii-sama leading them in person?"

Having completed her reconnaissance mission, Shandy Gaf Marea took a knee and said:

"Yes, your Highness. I have personally seen and verified Zorzal-denka's flag."

"They number ten thousand... How did they get these numbers, no, there's no point asking. Nii-sama must have planned to fight the final battle here from the start."

"Did you expect things to end up like this, Your Highness?" Bozes asked in a very circumspect manner.

"All I can say is that this was one of the situations I had predicted. I had the feeling this would happen after seeing how Nii-sama acts in his daily life. Rather than throw your men away in a hopeless defense until you're crushed in the end, why not bet on the slimmest of chances and try to end it all in one move?"

"Nobody understands Zorzal's nature like you, Pina-denka."

"That's not the case. From what I can see of the situation, this is something of a surprise."

"A surprise... you say?"

"The fact is, Nii-sama is a coward. Normally, he wouldn't have the courage to join a battle like this."

"Then this truly is an unusual situation. However, you said that you predicted his appearance?"

"Nii-sama fancies himself a hero. No, perhaps it should be, he wants others think of him as a hero? He feels that he should be a lecher because he's copying heroes, so he goes after women. But he has a massive inferiority complex, and he doesn't know how to treat noblewomen. He can't look them in the eye. So he surrounds himself with female slaves. Yet, the fact that he's satisfied with female slaves shames him. So he treats them very badly, even abusing them. At the same time, he believes that he's a brave man, and as a result, he firmly

believes that he needs to take part in this long-shot battle.”

“...Somehow, I feel this is kind of... unseemly.”

“Well, it is

quite unbecoming, so it can’t be helped. In the past, Nii-sama snuck into my bed. I imagine he wanted to use his little sister’s body to prove his manhood because he couldn’t look other women in the face. However, I gave him a cold reception. To me it was only to be expected, but... ever since, Nii-sama went around taking female slaves, and he’s had complex feelings about me. He wants to erase his past shame and have me acknowledge his potency. That’s why he had me strung up and... well, he shamed himself once more and showed his pathetic side to me again.”

How could this be — everyone grabbed their heads.

Just thinking of the Empire could have been run so ragged for the sake of his vainglory was unbearable.

“As Nii-sama’s sister, I have something to ask of you all. I hope you will all keep this secret. After all, this is very embarrassing.”

Pina’s gathered subordinates all said, “what are we going to do”, and then nodded while saying, “Alright.”

At the start, some people had thought of Zorzal as a threat, but now there was nobody who did so. In that sense, the fact that Pina had not launched into a bold speech had successfully exorcised the fear of Zorzal from their hearts.

“That said, being able to have you here is a godsend. That’s because I will be able to fight that walking mass of complexes with the greatest fighting force I have ever had at my disposal.”

There were less than 8000 troops remaining in Italica.

Even so, that was enough for a defensive siege. If they could hold the city against the enemy attack, reinforcements would eventually come. In other words, all they had to do was stand their ground in the city.

“However, the civil war will not end this way. It cannot be ended this way.”

Pina addressed her subordinates once more: Bozes, Beefeater, Nicolashka,

Hamilton and Gray; the subordinates who she had grown up with, and then the demihuman commanders of Dozzel (Dark Elf), Mason (Dwarf), Elnan (Six-Arms) and Koldol (Weretiger).

“Gather the representatives of each tribe to this hall. I have something I wish to tell you all before anything else.”

Bozes asked: “You mean to say, you intend to prepare an unconventional tactic?”

“Correct. Personally, I would very much like to sally forth and meet Nii-sama.”

That’s

— everyone looked at each other, shocked looks on their faces. That was because everyone knew that fortifying themselves in the city would minimize their casualties, yet they could not think of any reason why she wanted to deliberately leave the city and fight.

The Dark Elf tribal chief Dozzel, who had been appointed Viscount of Bedweiden, had a surprised expression as he asked:

“I will obey any order you give no matter what their contents might be, but could you explain why you said that?”

“Of course. That’s why I want you to gather all the commanders, so I can explain.”

“Then I’ll get everyone right away.”

Shandy and others immediately broke into a run.

“Greetings, everyone. I wish to take the field and challenge Nii-sama on the field of battle. The reason is because I want to have this place be the site of the true final battle. It is because I do not want Zorzal to escape.”

While everyone else was shocked silent, Gray Co Aldo asked:

“What do you mean, your Highness? I pray you will explain in detail, that your servant may understand.”

This was Gray’s position; a man looking her in the face and asking her a question when the others had trouble speaking. Gray, a veteran of many campaigns, was giving voice to the doubts that every man present, both officers and enlisted, had in their hearts. Pina understood too — she had to convince him in order to convince everyone else.

“Let’s assume we were to fight from within the city. In that case, Zorzal’s forces would throw themselves at us. Once the battle drags on, my cowardly Nii-sama would start to panic and worry that our reinforcements will arrive. Then, he’ll flee at a suitable time, putting down roots elsewhere while biding his time to rise again. If that happens, the civil war will never end. Therefore, I do not intend to let Nii-sama have his way, and in order to do that, we must make him forget about the time. We must make him think he’s just one last push away from victory, right until help arrives.”

“So that’s why you will be taking the field? However, if that happens, we can expect to see a sizable amount of casualties.”

“I hope you all will be prepared for that. We are essentially going to be fighting a sustained defense. I’m fairly sure there will be a lot of the losses we’re all worried about. However, it’ll be better than letting Nii-sama flee and prolonging the civil war. If we settle things here, we’ll lose fewer people in the long run.”

Everyone was silent once more as they took in her weighty words.

That was because everyone felt that Pina had a point. Still, this was essentially turning their dead into statistics. To the commanders present, they would be sacrificing soldiers whose faces they knew and whose names they had called. Even if doing so was for the sake of the future, it was still very hard to accept the necessity of sacrificing them.

“Still, your Highness, will reinforcements really come? If they do, how long will we have to wait?”

Pina smiled at Gray's question and replied, "I don't know. After all, this is war. If we base our operations upon the progress of our allies, I can't be sure when exactly they will arrive, but I guess they'll come within a day or two."

The Dwarf Chieftain Mason, appointed the Count of Glenda, shifted his heavy torso and rose.

"U~mu. In that case, there's nothing else for it. I'll take their first charge."

"No. We of the Six-Arms Tribe can't let the Dwarves do all the work."

"That's right! Think about it, this is a chance for us — who have been harried to the ends of the Empire — to regain our glory."

Dozzel, Elnan and Koldol shouted one of the other. The other commanders seemed to have been overwhelmed by their voices because they nodded as well."

"Umu. If we miss this chance, we'll be looked down on until the next chance we have to fight. We need to achieve a victory here that everyone will be forced to acknowledge. Let's fight a battle for the ages."

"Exactly! This is a chance for us, who have been rotting far away from the battlefield, to fight the foe. How could anyone not be happy about that?"

"Oh yes. The chance to shine that I thought was far from us has now arrived at our doorstep. Who knows, we might be able to capture Zorzal in a pitched battle."

The leaders' fighting spirit and readiness to fight the final battle immediately spread throughout the men. Their hope lay in fighting bravely until the very end, in order to improve the standing of their tribes and earn a bright future for their families and children. Holding that hope in their hearts, the demihuman soldiers hardened their resolve to utterly crush the opposition, standing fast in the face of Zorzal's charging forces.

Faced with the legitimate government's army arrayed in front of Italica, Zorzal's imperial legions hit them head-on. Given that they had their backs to a solid fortress, it was very difficult for them to strike from their flanks or the rear, so they had no choice.

Their spears and shields raised, the frontliners of both sides met in a clash of pure strength. The crashing sounds from this intense struggle echoed all around, making a sound like dozens of gravel cars colliding with each other.

Lines of spearpoints, arrayed as densely as a forest, crashed into each other and snapped. Bits of shattered shields were flung into the air, and countless wood scraps flew in all directions. Soldiers stabbed by spears collapsed like puppets whose strings had been cut, bathed in the blood that spurted from them.

But the soldiers did not back off. They faced each other down where they stood.

There was no disruption in their battle lines. The men standing behind supported their comrades in front. When the soldiers in front of them collapsed, the men behind them shouted battlecries as they swung their axes down and stepped into the fray.

The Weretigers kept low and swept the soldiers' calves out from under them, opening a breach in Zorzal's lines.

Behind them, the Dwarven heavy infantry lined up their shields and exerted shocking force, advancing under the pinpoint shooting of Elven bows, which rained arrows down on the enemy.

Half-naked giants like Lokis and Gigas swung their near-rusted swords.

The small-framed Samzas formed a spear line and thrust one after the other.

Faced with the demihuman troops' unexpectedly solid defense, Zorzal's troops began to tire of attacking.

"Since we can only attack head-on, we're wasting a surprising amount of time even though we outnumber the enemy," Zorzal murmured to himself as he

watched the battle unfold.

While the fighting had only just begun, after both sides had contacted each other, the battle had stalemated. The observers had a particularly hard time bearing with this.

“In the end, warfare is basically figuring out how to encircle the enemy. Pina-sama must have chosen to fight a pitched battle with the intention of avoiding such a situation. After all, your defense is solid when hiding behind city walls, but at the same time it implies that there is no escape.”

Of course, it would be different if she had an escape route, Helm mused, but Zorzal laughed out loud.

“The impudent little wench. If I’d known, I would have brought the elephants along.”

Then we’d be able to trample them head-on, Zorzal grumbled.

However, they could not bring such troops with them and move their forces through the heavily-forested mountains.

“That said, if Pina’s aim was to secure an escape route, then we need to keep an eye on anyone escaping from Italica. If we’re lucky, we might be able to catch a big fish.”

Zorzal believed that Pina wanted to avoid encirclement in order to secure an escape route for the Emperor. In that case, all they would have to do was watch closely, and when the Emperor fled Italica, they might be able to capture him.

“Yes, sir. I’ve already sent scouts ahead to keep an eye on them.”

After saying so, Helm ordered: “Third rank! Forward!”

They beat their wardrums and blew on their bugles.

The formation that had been standing by all this time — all several thousand men’s worth of them — began to advance.

Now that fresh forces had been committed to the fray, one of Pina’s units began moving to impede the enemy advance. There were about 1’500 of them.

“Pina-denka, your flaw is that you’re too loyal, and you insist on meeting your

foe with superior force!”

Helm continued giving orders.

“Fourth rank, join them and advance!”

“Nicolashka! Have Battlegroup Dozzel move up with Battlegroup Mason!”

The mixed unit of Elves and Dwarves numbered 1500 and they began to advance, taking the charge of Zorzal’s forces head-on.

Their formation had changed shape due to the intense fighting, but they somehow managed to shrug off the enemy advance and succeeded in forcing them back.

“More enemies approaching!”

“Battlegroup Elnan! Battlegroup Koldol, go deal with them!”

Pina muttered, “Dammit,” after shouting her orders.

She understood right away — Helm was making use of his advantage in numbers to fatigue Pina.

Pina had about 6000 men outside the city. Zorzal’s 10000 men were divided into ten blocks of 1000, and they launched wave after wave of consecutive attacks. Each time, Pina sent roughly 1500 men to repel each offensive.

1000 men against 1500 men. The objective was to achieve local superiority and crush the enemy while reducing losses to themselves in order to continue fighting.

However, that meant that once more than three enemy units attacked at once, she had no choice but to use her own unit to intercept them.

Pina understood this, but she did not expand her battle lines in order to keep fresh enemy troops from joining the fray. That was because if she kept the field of engagement limited, then it did not matter how many troops the enemy had; they could not join the battle and could only act as guerillas.

“Dozzel, you’re too far forward! Move 200 steps back!”

However, given just the slightest bit of slack in their leashes, the demihuman troops broke free of Pina's control. They advanced as quickly as possible in order to seize the advantage.

The demihumans were excellent individual combatants, but they had difficulty fighting in formed units.

Opposite to how one would bear camaraderie towards others of the same race, their resistance towards other species disrupted their unit cohesion.

Thus, the coordination between the various units was poor. The gaps in their formation grew larger, and the enemy was only too happy to fill them.

And then, the unit composed of humans launched their attack.

The fourth unit from Zorzal's lines closed rapidly on them.

"Your Highness! It's a fourth unit from Zorzal's forces!"

"How about Battlegroup Helmine?"

Every unit was fighting an ever-increasing number of foes.

"Still fighting. They're locked in combat with the enemy and they can't move."

"Dammit."

Bozes saw Pina click her tongue and turned back.

"Beefeater."

"Oh! It's our turn!"

Beefeater nimbly mounted her horse. She grabbed a lance from one of the troops following her and shouted to her people.

"White Rose Knights! Let's go!"

And so, a company of knights rode forth.

Beefeater spurred her horse into a gallop over the land and formed her unit into a wedge, aiming for a gap in Zorzal's lines like an arrow.

"Uryaaaa!"

Beefeater skillfully swung her lance and unhorsed an enemy officer in passing, and then she plunged into the enemy troops.

The troops behind her maintained a beautiful formation as they crushed the infantry before them in a textbook maneuver. Even their horses were in perfect sync, and the sound of their hooves treading the ground was like the footfall of some gigantic beast.

A ceremonial honor guard — that was what the troops of the regional garrisons called the knight order. However, this time round, the coordination and synchronicity that only ceremonial troops possessed showed its worth.

“Alright! Everyone prepare to fall back!”

Beefeater’s analysis of the battle situation was excellent, and her decision to retreat was very well made.

At the same time, the unit receiving her commands moved swiftly.

While they thought they could overrun the enemy, the lady knights fell back immediately without seeking glory. Since they were all female, they could not compare to the foe in arm-strength. They knew that once the battle devolved into a melee, they would be at a grave disadvantage.

Beyond letting their horses handle the charge, their fighting style as knights was to advance quickly, strike fast, and fade rapidly. By the time Zorzal’s men regained their order and raised their swords to counterattack, the women had long since disappeared before their eyes. All Zorzal’s men could do was watch the enemy flee, their faces bitter as they stood amidst the corpses of their comrades.

“Attack from the rear!”

While they stood in place, the Six-Arm tribesmen led by Elnan had returned.

The way they could use a sword, shield and bow at the same time made them look like Asuras, and Zorzal’s fourth echelon, who had finally gotten the melee they wanted, found themselves dragged into circumstances they could not have imagined.

(TL Note: Asuras: six-armed demigods from Buddhist mythology)

Beefeater's cavalry had made a mockery of the unit sent to attack the enemy's weaknesses, and as Zorzal saw this, he glared mockingly at his general.

"What's wrong, Helm. Having trouble, are we?"

"I knew this wouldn't be so easy, but I didn't expect Pina-sama to be so resilient on the defense."

"Well, she is

my sister, after all," Zorzal said with a hint of joy in his voice.

Zorzal was still feeling quite relaxed. He was probably thinking about how General Helm would defeat his sister, of whom he was most proud.

"Still, we can't leave the men in a tight spot like that. We'll use our next move."

Helm committed his reserves to the fray to rescue his flagging forces, and ordered the entire army to briefly retreat

Naturally, this was not an easy task. Retreating from an advancing enemy was a task that entailed drawing away from the foe while defending against their attacks, and it was more difficult than advancing to attack.

In order to prevent a total collapse of the battle lines, care had to be given even to its weakest parts, and everyone had to remain vigilant.

However, the officers and men led by Helm managed to do it. They were all hoary veterans of the guerilla campaign against the JSDF, and they were used to retreating. At the same time, Pina forbade a pursuit in order to keep the theatre of battle from widening further — that was why casualties on both sides did not increase.

As a distance opened up between both sides, there was a lull in the intense fighting.

They used this time to let their beleaguered troops regain their stamina and change out their damaged and destroyed weapons. They reorganized the lineup of their forces. Permission was also given to eat and drink, and one could see the men consuming their rations and drinking water.

Head Oprichnik Upson had observed the fighting by Zorzal's side all this while.

As he ate, he expressed his admiration for the battle.

“Seeing two armies collide head on is a splendid sight, the likes of which history has never seen. General, since you’ve finished testing the foe, how will you crush them after this?”

Helm twisted his lips unhappily.

That was because to him, this battle was a straight-up slugging match and there was nothing splendid about it.

Being addressed like this felt like an insult. However, as he mused that Upson might actually be giving genuine praise, Helm was at a loss for how to answer.

Continuing the battle like this would be idiotic in the extreme, but actually saying, “there is nothing more retarded than doing that” would probably upset Upson, who had just praised. Therefore, he decided to use humility to duck the praise of a clueless man.

“As if, it’s hardly amazing.”

“Still, this battle really was quite nerve-wracking.”

“Oh yes. However, it won’t be like that next time. Thus, I’d like to tell you the implications of Pina-sama using demihumans to fight.”

Zorzal asked him “What do you mean”, and Helm answered, “I’m more experienced with using monsters and demihumans in battle.”

Helm ordered the attack to begin anew.

Mutra led a freshly reconstituted unit of two to three thousand men in a head-on attack. Both sides clashed, and the corpses piled up as blood flowed in rivers.

“It seems it’s become a mindless contest of strength.”

Helm nodded as he heard Zorzal’s thoughts on the matter. However, Helm had already briefed Mutra on the details of this operation before the fighting had begun. All they could do was watch silently.

“Observe.”

Soon, the attackers began falling back.

It looked as though they had had it and were thus retreating, but they were immediately reinforced. The constant influx of fresh fighting strength kept the battle at a deadlock.

“In truth, demihumans are driven by their impulses. No matter how you try to remind or stop them, there will always be some idiot who can’t take it and charges forward.”

Even humans were that way. That was a trait that had to be corrected by long hours of training. However, training demihumans in that way was a waste of effort.

And indeed, just as Helm said, once Zorzal’s forces began falling back, there were those who broke ranks and chased them. While the unit commanders desperately tried to stop them, their men refused to listen and continued charging after the enemy.

Even from the rear, the entire situation was plainly obvious.

“Karasta! Have the archers target the local commanders.”

Without a commander to stop them from advancing, the unit would be unable to remain coordinated.

The demihuman units instantly dissolved into an unorganized mob, and they were beaten back by Zorzal’s forces, losing men like they were being sanded away.

As the vicious battle took place outside the city, a battle of another sort began as well, within the Formal family home.

Zorzal’s clandestine reconnaissance forces had made their way into the manor.

Meeting them were the Formal house troops and the battle maids.

The head maid gave orders to the house troops and the maids who had already taken their positions.

“The fortunes of House Formal rest on this battle. Defend His Majesty and Myui-sama at all costs. Understood?”

“Yes!”

The maids shouted a heartening answer, and the alarm whistles blew.

“Report! We have intruders! Persia’s team is tracking them.”

The head maid nodded to the Catperson messenger who had just submitted a report.

“This is probably a feint. All of you, be careful! Don’t get lured away from the ground in the confusion!”

“Yes!”

The head maid nodded in satisfaction at their reassuring response. She then walked briskly down the corridor to the Emperor’s bedroom.

The door was still flanked by the female knights Pina had assigned to stand guard here. Normally, these lady knights would be standing there as mere ceremonial ornaments, but now they were the last line of defense.

“The rogues are here. Please be careful.”

Upon hearing the head maid’s words, the two female officers clenched their fists over their chests to salute, by way of reply.

One of them was Shandy gaf Marea, while the other was Suisses Co Meino.

Shandy had caused a lot of problems, but that had all been because of her loyalty to Pina. She had received Pina’s trust, and she shouldered a heavy burden — a personal “I’m counting on you” from Pina — in manning this final defensive line.

“Please leave it to me. I will defend this door with my life.”

“Mm.”

Pina hugged Shandy and Suisses.

Pina knew that the order she had given them — “to the death” — was intended in a very literal sense here.

The bed where the Emperor lay was visible beyond the two heavy doors.

Beside them were the Minister of the Interior Count Marx and the Emperor’s favored Countess, Sherry.

Myui, the heiress to House Formal, was playing with dolls on the spacious wooden floor. Her playmate was the Medusa Aurea, who was dressed in maid clothing.

The head maid regarded the interior, and after ensuring that all was well, she delivered a report.

“Your Majesty. Zorzal-sama’s men are attacking.”

“Mm. In other words, he’s matured enough to take part in this throw of the dice. If he hadn’t been that way back then, perhaps he could have surmounted his hardship and become a king. What a shame.”

Myui raised her head.

“Zorzal-sama can’t become the Emperor-sama?”

“In order to become Emperor, one needs intelligence in other fields. Someone like him is unable to maintain a vast nation like the Empire and pass it on to the next generation.”

Myui tilted her head and asked, “But won’t everyone have to obey him when he becomes Emperor-sama?”

“Well... No, for starters... Sherry, you try explaining to her.”

“Ah, yes.”

Sherry looked briefly shocked when she was suddenly addressed, but she immediately resumed her smiling face and explained to the girl who was younger than herself.

“Myui-sama, people don’t obey a title. They obey because someone is powerful is enough to make them obey. Titles are just a decoration used so that people can accept it more easily.”

Also, when people without ability reached a high position in a group, those groups and society itself would surely collapse.

When she reached this point, Sherry realised why the Emperor had not chosen to explain it himself. That was because it would sound like he was bragging that “I’m the Emperor because I’m so great”, and also because saying that the Empire had fragmented to this extent was because Molt was not suited for the throne.

“But, everyone obeys Myui. Myui’s just a kid, though...”

“That’s because you’re a good girl. Everyone hopes you’ll show that kind of talent someday.”

“But what if Myui was a bad girl?”

“In that case, I’m sure nobody would listen to you. Even if they looked like they were obeying, there’s no telling what they’d do if you weren’t looking. “

“M-Myui’s going to be a good girl! Rum, you need to raise Myui into a good girl...”

The head maid knelt before Myui and said, “By all means. Please leave it to your Rum, my Lady,” and nodded.

“Sherry-sama, why couldn’t Zorzal-sama become the Emperor-sama? Was he a bad boy? Couldn’t he have been a good boy?”

Sherry was stuck for how to answer Myui’s question. It would seem she would have to choose her words very carefully no matter how she answered.

In truth, both the Emperor and Marx were also at a loss, and they smiled bitterly. The young girl’s innocent question was essentially blaming the Emperor for not being a good parent.

The Emperor seemed amused by how puzzled Sherry was, and so he lent her a hand.

“In truth, that’s right. He’s not a capable boy, and the man who raised him to be so incapable was me. In other words, I’m the one behind all of this. Just as you said, Myui, I’m a bad boy. Therefore, I had to flee here from the Imperial

Capital...”

At this point, even Myui realised the meaning of what she had said, and she decided to seek the reason from a different direction.

“Ah, but if we say that Your Majesty’s to blame for Zorzal-sama turning out to be a bad boy, then that’s because Your Majesty’s father and mother were bad kids, and that’s because Your Majesty’s father and mother’s parents, your grandpa and grandma...”

Myui tilted her head again.

“It just keeps going on.”

If one said that one turned out the way one did because of one’s parents, then the root cause could be traced back up one’s lineage. In the end, one would reach unicellular lifeforms floating in the primordial soup. Pointing at such primitive creatures and shouting, “It’s all because of you that I ended up like this” was utterly comical and hardly bore thinking.

Of course, there was no theory of evolution in the Special Region. According to mythology, mankind began from the dirt, but pointing at the dirt and shouting “it’s all your fault” was also a wash. Even if one decided to bypass that and scold the gods, that was ultimately just shifting blame.

If one asked Hardy, the Goddess of the Underworld, she might say, “It’s the duty of the gods to accept the censure of such foolish humans”. However, even if one assigned the blame for one’s miserable condition to someone else, it would not alter their present circumstances in the slightest. A person was the only person who ruled themselves, and the maker of one’s present self was one’s past self. If one wanted to make a better version of themselves tomorrow, then they would have no choice but to begin working on themselves today.

“...Myui-sama. Whether or not you can become a good girl doesn’t depend on your parents. After all, Sherry’s parents were both good people, but Sherry ended up as a bad girl.”

“Sherry, you’re a bad girl?”

Sherry peeked left and right, as though to show that she was afraid of the

world's eyes, and quietly said:

“Oh yes. Don't be fooled, I'm a very bad person.”

“Is that why you lost your home and family, Sherry-sama?”

“Yes. Therefore. I hope you'll become a good girl, Myui-sama.”

Myui said, “You poor thing” and gently patted Sherry's head.

After the conversation between the two young ones came to a halt, the head maid turned to face the Emperor and the Minister of the Interior once more.

“Your Majesty. The battle in the shadows has begun. My girls have already tightened up their defense, but the interior of the manor has already become a battleground. Please be careful. Sherry-sama, please return to your room. I will show you the way.”

“I wish to stay here and wait for the results of the battle.”

Sherry tried to plead with the Emperor, but Molt shook his head and said, “There's no need for that. Battles are things that are to be waited out with one's family. The Senate does the same thing, do they not? In addition, I wish to entrust you with a task.”

After that, the Minister of the Interior spoke gravely.

“Your Majesty. Such a task might be too weighty for the Countess to bear.”

“However, we have somehow managed to reach favorable terms with Nihon. Do you not think we might be able to buy their sympathy with this little lady in case the worst happens?”

“Indeed, that is true, but in that case, the Empire's dignity will—”

After hearing the dialogue between the Emperor and the Minister of the Interior, Sherry asked, “What kind of task is this?”

The Count clarified: “His Majesty intends to appoint you as the Empire's negotiator in Japan.”

“Ap-appoint me?”

“Yes. I hope you will immediately set out to Japan from this place. You will be our lifeline and if the worst happens, I hope you will convince Japan to take in

those who seek shelter.”

“...And by the worst you mean...?”

Marx quietly told her, “I mean, if His Majesty should lose this battle.”

“How, how could this be? His Majesty is still observing the battle now...”

“Pina is fighting with all her might. Even so, giving it her all does not guarantee that she will win. This is war, after all, and one must consider what might happen if one loses. After all, we cannot let everyone die here. Please, Sherry.”

Sherry looked to Count Marx like she was begging him for help. Marx noted Sherry and how she wanted him to say something, but only replied, “I will draw up the documentation right away. Now, prepare yourself for travel.”

After that, Molt added, “Mm. You may leave.”

“Sherry-sanma. If the worst happens, please take care of Myui-sama. I leave her in your care.

Now that the adults were looking at her with expectant eyes, Sherry could no longer refuse.

Chapter 3

After the JGSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force's 1st, 2nd and 3rd Combat Groups stomped over the Imperial Army's defensive lines, each Combat Group made haste towards their original objective, trailing dust in their wake.

However, the accomplishments of Colonel Kengun's 4th Combat Group left everyone else staring.

Originally, being forced to fight in tandem with the legitimate Empire government's forces was like shackling them, but their combat performance was more like "taking that ball and chain around your feet and beating the enemy to death with it". They attacked Imperial bases and then went on to destroy Imperial Army units stationed in various locations.

"Battlegroup Heinkeli has destroyed the Imperial Army's Second Brigade. They're going to conduct cleanup operations after this."

"Battlegroup Selbel has destroyed the middle of the Imperial Army's Third Brigade. They're spreading out in the rear!"

The five eye-shaped red tokens were surrounded by several green tokens on the map that was spread out over the ground.

To anyone familiar with Imperial combat tactics, this war was unfolding in a way that made people want to shout, "this is unfair!"

Many tokens moved over the map in a short span of time. When the staff officers sent from the legitimate government forces saw this, they were so surprised that they could not even express their shock, and all they could do was stare in entrancement.

"Normally, wars are fought in an orderly fashion, beginning at the frontline and progressing onward. The people in the front are reassured by the presence of their comrades in the rear, so all they need to do is concentrate on what's happening to their front. Meanwhile, the people in the rear have faith that the

vanguard will stop the enemy's first strike, so they can gather their strength and resolve before the call to war is sounded. Therefore, attacking the enemy from the rear is the best way to secure victory."

"But the enemy might have stationed a rear guard."

"Correct. And coordinating the vanguard, main body and rear guard to fight is known as the two-headed dragon. But with these hellybone operations..."

"No, they're called heliborne ops."

"Yes, that's it. These hellybones have squashed this two-headed dragon flat like it was a bug. Once the commanders in the main body have been killed off, they aren't a two-headed dragon any more; they're nothing more than a disorganized rabble."

The red tokens on the map formed a long, thin defensive line around the fortresses of Wess, Marais and Rekki, possibly to defend against the attack of the coalition army's blue and green tokens from the west.

However, their vanguards were scattered because they did not know the direction from which the enemy would attack.

They used their vanguards as feelers to contact the enemy, and once combat began, the main body would surge forward to reinforce the battle line.

However, the main body that should have been waiting safely in the rear had instead been the first to suffer attack.

The three fortresses were stocked with food and weapons, yet two of them had fallen in an instant. By looking at the map, the green tokens in the middle of a sea of red tokens looked isolated and surrounded, but in truth, encircling and exterminating them required extremely high intelligence-gathering ability as well as the ability to delegate command and good decision-making abilities.

Such a thing was impossible of the Imperial generals, who wholeheartedly believed that the enemy would attack from the west.

"Well, the Empire once tried to amass a great host of Wyverns to fight like this in the past."

"Indeed. However, they could not gather enough of them, so they couldn't

carry out the plan. Also, fighting like this requires the ability for commanders to communicate with each other even when they're in different locations. The Japanese army has fulfilled both these conditions. See how we can firmly grasp the state of the war even without being in the central headquarters. Thanks to that ability, the officers and men can confidently take part in operations that could very well see them stranded in the middle of the enemy."

Before the eyes of the two staff officers, the right wing of the green tokens which represented the legitimate government's army as they advanced on the Imperial Capital crushed the red tokens in their path.

The red tokens vanished with a kachak.

"Just a little more..."

"Yes. If we can bring down Fort Rekki, we'll have the enemy in the bag."

On the map, the huge mass of red tokens were gradually encircled by a very small amount of green tokens.

In order to draw the net closed, the green tokens formed the shape of a bamboo-copter as they plunged into the heart of the enemy formation — Fort Rekki.

As implied by the term "rotary-winged aircraft", helicopters developed tremendous lifting power and thrust from their main rotors... their enormous propellers, and by so doing they could fly through the air.

Thanks to this unique construction, helicopters could ascend, rapidly descend and suddenly stop in a way that fixed-wing aircraft could never accomplish. The whirling tokens moved in a similar fashion, not just advancing, but moving backwards, to the left and to the right.

Of course, this unique structure was also its weakness.

If the rotor blades were destroyed, they would no longer be able to float in the sky, only lose their balance and crash to the ground.

Of course, the tail also had a miniature rotor to control horizontal direction.

The tail rotor was a vital component in maintaining a helicopter's positioning. The powerful engine allowed the massive main rotor to turn at high speeds, and the tail rotor existed to counteract the contra-rotation experienced by the helicopter's body as a result of the main rotor. Thus, if the tail rotor was lost, the helicopter would begin to spin around like a teacup ride at an amusement park and plunge to earth.

The Imperial Wyvern Corps had carefully observed that characteristic of helicopters, and they had that principle in mind as they threw down their chain-link nets during their surprise attack.

"Evade!"

As they saw the nets spreading in mid-air, the pilots broke formation and got out of their way.

The Wyvernriders immediately moved to pursue. However, it was difficult for heavy chained nets to hit objects moving rapidly through the air.

That said, if they dropped 10 or 20 such nets, they would snare one or two unlucky helicopters.

The chains were made with the Empire's undeveloped metallurgy and they could not break the rotor blades, but they successfully disrupted the helicopters' flight stability.

If they managed to snare the tail rotors, their target would cease to function and the helicopter would start spinning rapidly like a leaf on the wind.

"We're going down! Hang on tight!"

"What, what happened!?"

The world spinning madly before his eyes, the pilot clung to the control stick for dear life as he shouted, and the Elbe Kingdom troops behind him shouted, "We're falling!"

"Keep quiet, you'll bite your tongue!"

There was a crash and the sound of metal crumpling, accompanied by an impact that seemed to rise from below their buttocks, and then a voice from behind shouted "Get off! It's going to blow!" The soldiers broke into a run, as

though the words had physically shoved them forward.

Their vision still spinning, the freshly-landed soldiers stumbled away like drunken men.

Of course, they were visible from the air. The helicopter had crash-landed and the passengers had scattered in panic like fleeing spiderlings. The fallen vehicle exploded. The crimson blaze and the black smoke made the Imperial soldiers recall the taste of victory, which they had not savored for so long.

“We did it!”

“Dammit, we don’t have enough nets.”

“Go pick up the dropped nets! We’ll go attack them! Carry on!”

Under their commander’s direction, the Wyvernriders who had finished throwing their nets nimbly broke apart and descended rapidly, attacking from above the helicopters.

The lead Imperial Wyvernriders launched several arrows at a descending UH-1, as though to demonstrate, before couching his lance and plunging into a charge at frightening speeds .

He shouted “With me! With me!” and countless Wyverns followed in his wake.

However, all the arrows he fired were knocked away by the spinning rotors.

“In that case, how about this!?”

He took aim at the pilot seated at the front of the cockpit with his dragonlance.

Thanks to the speed of his descent and the air resistance, the Wyvernriders’ commander trembled along with his prided mount. The dragonlance shook up and down as it cut through the air, but he used all his might to keep it under control, and adjusted his angle of attack at the enemy.

The helicopter he was targeting and the pilot he was aiming for grew rapidly in his eyes.

“Yeeeeeeaaart!”

However, the enemy suddenly changed position in the moment before he was about to hit, and the shaft of the dragonlance disintegrated into sawdust; it had been chopped to pieces by the spinning rotors. In addition, the Wyvernriders' leader and his beloved dragon had been cleaved in half together.

It was like he had physically exploded, his blood spraying into the air like foam.

After seeing the hideous fate of their commander, who had led the charge, the Wyvernriders behind him realized the danger of rapidly descending and the pulled up on their reins. They orbited several times before launching arrow attacks from the comparatively safer flanks.

"We can't hit them from above! Attack from the sides or head on! Bring them down!"

After hearing the words of the experienced General Podawon, they attacked from all sides.

In order to keep up with the rapid direction changes of the helicopters, whose aerial mobility permitted them a rapid mix of ascent and descent, the Wyvernriders were forced to fly complicated patterns in their mad quest to attack their blind spots.

And so, the Wyverns dueled with the helicopters in a furious dogfight.

Dogfights involving attack helicopters were more like motocross races,

While helicopters might lack the ability to pull off the stunts that fixed-wing craft could perform in aerial combat, on the other hand, they could capable of exciting aerobatic tricks of their own in the lateral plane.

Flying up and down, suddenly pivoting in place and then showering the enemy trying to catch up with .50 caliber rounds was something which only rotary-winged craft could perform. The helicopters' engines roared as they slashed through the air, then forcefully pulled away from the Wyverns and intercepted their attack.

However, the Imperial Wyvern Corps were not beaten by that.

They hovered in mid-air as their riders eased off on their reins, or they

flapped their wings to rise and fall.

They made skilful use of their flexible bodies and tails, changing their angle of attack from unexpected angles and neatly evaded the machinegun fire from the door gunners.

One of the Wyvernriders leaned out from behind their saddles, turning through a hail of bullets like a circus performer and then stabbing out with his slender dragonlance as he passed below the medium-sized helicopters.

“Got him!”

Simply piercing a helicopter’s outer shell would not impede its flight ability. However, the fact that they had actually struck a helicopter caused the Wyvernriders’ morale to soar.

All prey had their weaknesses. One could not finish them off without hitting them. On the other hand, even a pinprick to that weakness could cause lethal harm. Now that they knew lances were not useless, all they needed to do next time was to continue attacking that weakness.

“Alright! Pierce that wounded belly with your lances!”

General Podawon ordered the three Wyvernriders covering him to attack the helicopter which was wobbling and flying at low altitudes.

Since it was alive, attacking the weak point in its belly out to be the correct course of action. However, this foe concealed fearsome claws within its belly.

As the Wyvernriders raised their lances to approach, they were welcomed by a team of the Elbe Kingdom’s elite troops, whose razor-sharp arrows were fully drawn.

“Loose! Don’t aim, just fire! You won’t hit with arrows even if you aim! Just throw those arrows out and hope for a lucky hit!”

The soldiers volleyed arrows under King Duran’s exhortations.

“You there, soldier! Good shooting. You try aiming. Doesn’t matter if you miss. Try and graze their faces with your arrows!”

“Er, yes, yes!”

The Wyverns were bathed in a rain of falling arrows.

Since the Wyverns wore barding, they were unmoved by the storm of arrows, but once an arrow shot past their faces, it was only natural that the impetus of their charge would be blunted.

“Dammit, what the hell are you doing!? Keep going! Charge in and hammer them!”

The Wyvernriders fought fiercely in response to Podawan’s shouts.

Two Wyverns charged in a straight line at the UH-1 in front of them, and then they bared their fangs and launched a pincer attack from the sides. They planned to bodily ram their target.

The pilot saw the enemy coming at him and pulled down on the control stick with too much force in an attempt to evade. The craft lost its balance and its main rotor turned toward the foe.

High-speed rotors were a fearsome thing, and the Wyvern rider was completely disintegrated as the rotor blades scythed him off his saddle. Even the Wyvern’s tough scales were ripped open and its blood burst into the air like fireworks. However, the Wyvern had inherited its deceased rider’s will, and its savage fangs and sharp claws latched onto the helicopter’s fuselage, gouging deep furrows into the outer shell as it clung to its enemy.

“Gah, we’ve lost balance! And in a place like this!”

The pilot struggled to restabilize the helicopter’s flight path

Behind it, the warriors of the Elbe Kingdom hacked at the Wyvern that had wrapped itself around the craft. However, the ground loomed before their eyes. The helicopter took the Wyvern with it as it hit the ground, exploded, and burned.

Though it felt like a massive wave making sport of a tiny boat, the pilot barely

managed to control his aircraft's flight. King Duran watched a crimson blaze and a plume of black smoke rise from the ground, and he shouted to the pilots.

"Those damn Imperials, are they mad? Be careful not to be rammed by the enemy!"

"What did he say?"

The pilot, who was seated on the left, addressed that question of the copilot on his right.

"He's probably saying the enemy will physically ram us, so be careful!"

While they did not seem to have understood his words, the copilot seemed to have divined their meaning from the tone of the language.

The pilot floored the gas and vigorously worked the joystick and forth with his right hand as he held onto the pitch control lever with his left, and he shouted, "Roger!"

The copilot looked from left to right and sighed:

"Dammit! How long do we have to keep doing this stunt flying!?"

The crew of the UH-1J, who were normally assigned to personnel and cargo transport duties, had not expected to dogfight like this. They had thought that they would be engaging ground targets at most.

"Hurry up and bring it down already!"

The pilot shouted, and the rider on the Wyvern behind them was drowned in a hail of bullets, and the crewmen shouted as his body burst apart.

"We're trying! But we're surrounded by friends. We can't go all-out."

"Coming from the right, no, this is bad! Dead ahead!" the copilot shouted.

Perhaps the Wyverns had seen through their evasive patterns, but one of them suddenly appeared in front of the helicopter. Its eyes, filled with hostility, peered through the cockpit glass and focused on the pilot.

"Watch out!"

The enemy threw a lance, which penetrated the canopy and pierced into the pilot's seat... or at least, it should have.

Someone's right hand had reached past the pilot's shoulder, as though to push him aside, and stopped the tip of the dragonlance with perfect timing.

"Your, Your Highness..."

If it had been allowed to go any further, the dragonlance would have nailed the pilot to his seat.

The pilot's eyes were drawn to the fresh blood beading off the old man's right hand, and he gulped. No, it was not because of the blood, but because he had been overwhelmed by the presence of a man who could subordinate an entire nation to his will.

"After all, if you die, I die too."

Duran pulled the dragonlance into the cabin, and laughed before bellowing at the warriors around him.

"Who told you to stop!? Shoot! Shoot! Keep shooting those arrows!"

Behind him, the soldiers of the legitimate government's army loosed arrow after arrow, bathing the Wyvernriders in a storm. But the Wyvernriders rolled out of the path of the arrows and swiftly peeled away.

"Dammit! This is really bad."

"Sir! The engine!"

The fully loaded helicopter had performed one too many maneuvers at the edge of its performance envelope, and its engine was about to overheat.

"Alright, we'll set down, then."

"No, wait!"

King Duran bellowed before the pilot could set his craft down. An old, bald knight was riding a Wyvern that looked more majestic than the average Wyvern, and it orbited above them as it looked down on the battlefield.

"That must be the enemy commander!"

"What's the king shouting about!?"

"Don't tell me he wants us to go over there?"

“Do you think we can!? The airframe’s on its last legs!”

“Think of a way to deal with him!”

Duran seized the pilot’s neck with his left hand and pointed at the enemy with the blade of his stolen dragonlance before shouting:

“You over there! You must be a renowned warrior; I challenge you!”

“Is, is he serious, is he actually going to duel him?”

The pilot could not resist the power of the prosthetic hand, which could crush him to bits if he dared resist, and so he turned the aircraft toward the enemy. After that, the enemy Wyvern rider replied:

“This one is General Podawon of Emperor Zorzal’s Imperial Army! You must be King Duran of the Elbe Kingdom, am I wrong!?”

“Ohhhh, Count Podawon!? Truly a worthy opponent!”

Podawon was clearly delighted to receive a challenge from a nation’s monarch, and he readied his dragonlance.

“It is a sublime honor to cross blades with Your Majesty! I tire of battling nameless footsoldiers with no accomplishments of note!”

As he shouted, Podawon faced his Wyvern toward Duran.

The two men stared each other down, pointing their lances at each other as they closed rapidly on each other.

After that, a furious exchange of blows took place in passing.

The king and the general’s dragonlances clashed in mid-air, and sparks flew.

“To the right, to the right!”

The pilot groaned, “my neck’s not a joystick” as Duran gripped it, and he turned the aircraft to the right.

Meanwhile, Podawon’s Wyvern spread its wings and spun left, preparing for another clash.

The Wyvern and the UH-1J approached each other again.

By the time they were close enough to see Podawon’s face, Duran suddenly

turned the pilot's neck leftward.

"To the left!"

Though the pilot's neck made sounds like he was undergoing some kind of chiropractic treatment, he did his duty and rapidly turned left.

"The bastard, he was planning to ram us!"

Duran bellowed in anger, gripped his sword and looked for Podawon. However, the enemy that should have been behind him was nowhere to be seen.

"Left!"

Everyone turned back to look as the copilot shouted.

Just before the dragonlance pierced through the lower left flank of the fuselage, Podawon skilfully worked the dragonlance through the side opening of the cabin to strike at Duran.

Duran used the bracer on his left arm, which was holding the pilot's neck, to block the tip of the dragonlance. However, he could not bleed off the momentum, and Duran's body flew into the air.

"We're not done yet!"

"Your Majesty!"

Duran, who had been flung out of the aircraft, swung down below the airframe and leapt at Podawon.

Suddenly seized from behind, Podawon clenched his fist and backhanded Duran across the face.

"Damn vassal king!"

"I heard the vassal kings were gathered into that coalition because of that weird proposal of yours! Die!"

Duran hit back.

The two old men segued grappled with each other on the saddle of the Wyvern.

This was a slugfest with both sides stuck to each other. They could not block and they could not dodge, and so their faces immediately swelled up and broken teeth scattered.

“Go blame Emperor Molt for that if you want!”

“Of course I hate him! We’re allies out of necessity, but I’ll have my revenge on him one day!”

Perhaps he sensed that punching each other would not solve the problem, because Podawon’s right hand closed around the dagger at his waist.

I won’t let you get your way

— Duran reached out his right hand to seize Podawon’s right arm, but Podawon used both hands to force Duran’s arm up.

“Guwargh!”

One arm was no match for two. His right arm creaked, and Duran groaned.

Podawon had a triumphant look of pride on his face as he pinned Duran down, and then he glanced at the point of the dragonlance that had pierced Duran’s left bracer.

“Your luck ran out when you took my dragonlance with your left arm...”

He calmly drew his dagger, and its blade flashed as Podawon prepared to stab Duran.

But in that moment, Podawon coughed up blood.

It was a bolt from the miniature crossbow installed in Duran’s left arm.

Having taken a clean hit, Podawon looked down in disbelief at the bolt embedded in his chest. At the same time, he fell from his Wyvern’s saddle and faded from sight.

Duran’s shoulders shuddered tremendously as he looked at his artificial left arm, which rested on the Wyvern’s back,

“So what about my left arm? I lost it a long time ago.”

The Wyverns were still encircling the embattled helicopter flight.

However, a stream of cannon shells tore the Wyverns to shreds, striking them from the air.

“What, what was that!?”

“This is Colonel Kamikoda and friends of the JA! We’re here to help”

The four Phantom jets swooped down into the battlefield like eagles taking aim at their prey.

The savage roar of the fighters froze the Wyvernriders’ hearts in their chests, and the JSDF servicemen cheered as their morale soared.

“They’re allies! They’re Phantoms of the JA!”

Thanks to the intervention of four F-4 Phantom fighters from the JASDF, the whirling dance of death which they thought would last forever came to an end.

There were only four Phantom fighters, but their sheer, overwhelming presence conquered the skies of the Special Region.

They closed with tremendous force, spewed hails of cannon fire, then peeled away faster than the eye could follow — they were beings the Wyvernriders could not hope to resist.

The Wyverns were immediately plunged into a situation where they were harried all over the place. They took shells from the 20mm Vulcan cannons all over their bodies, snapping their wings off, and they fell from the sky like piles of minced meat.

“Whew~ we’re saved. You came just in time,” Lieutenant Colonel Kengun said as he wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked out the window.

Two pairs of two Phantom fighters traced a large, lazy arc through the sky as

they orbited them.

Looking back, it would seem Kengun and his men were in terrible shape.

The helicopter had flown up and down and left and right, bouncing them around inside the cabin, and they looked like they had been through a blender.

Still, it was better than being flung outside. Everyone clung to the floor or a seat, looking like they were about to die. Eventually, they managed to stand up, and they began checking that nobody had fallen out and that no gear had been dropped.

“Kamikoda here. All enemy resistance has been smashed. Are you alright?”

“We’re alive somehow. I need to thank you guys.”

“No need for that. But if you insist... well, invite us to the next mixer of yours.”

“We’ll accept if you insist” sounded a little bit threatening, but it sounded like a plea of sorts. Was there something wrong with his ears?

“A... mixer, you say?”

“I’ve heard the rumors too, Ken-san. They say you’re really close with the girls of the knight order, no? How sly, hoarding them all for yourself. I want to get along with beautiful ladies and pretty girls too~”

Kamikoda had never been able to resist attractive specimens of the fairer sex.

However, most women were taken aback by his bestial, savage demeanour. Almost no girls cared to learn about his strengths.

While some ladies were attracted by the prestige afforded by saying “I’m a JA pilot”, they soon discovered his intense personality once they tried dating, and that would be the end of it. In addition, since he said he was going to quit the JSDF and become a civilian pilot, he could not keep it up for long, and so he had remained single.

“S-Same as always, I see. Don’t you think you should try calming down a little?”

Kengun — one of several middle-aged single males — replied with an exhausted jab.

“I need to meet someone in order to calm down!”

“Can’t you do it the normal way? Well, more normal, at least.”

“I’m just a little older than most, but I’m not shrivelled up yet! I’m really thirsty here. ...Ah, shut up, pipe down, will you, Kurihama!”

It would seem his partner in the backseat was trying to lecture him.

However, Kamikoda retorted, “Come on, I can’t just give up like this, this is my only chance! I’ve come all this way to the Special Region, I can’t go back without seeing the hotties on this side! If Ken-san can do it, there’s no way I can’t! He must be using some kind of witchcraft to trick those girls! I’m sure of it!”

“Let me get this out of the way first, I haven’t done anything that would stain my conscience. More to the point, the ban on romantic relationships hasn’t been lifted yet.”

“Are you still saying that with things being what they are? Nobody follows that rule any more! It’s because they keep announcing it that people have secret relationships! Only people who seize the initiative win the day!”

For some reason the sound of crying seemed to be mixed into his protests. Or was it?

“Major Kamikoda. I’ll let you know this first. The girls of the knight order are very young.”

Considering they were all in their mid 40s, going on 50s, there was a clear difference between their ages and those of the girls.

“Do you expect me to believe that coming from a man who’s so close to such young girls? Besides, isn’t a big age gap in marriage the in thing now? It’s fine as we don’t break the law! Come on, Ken-san!”

Perhaps it was because of the Special Region, or perhaps it was because the lady knights were all fairly unique, but they tended to favor mentally mature men. In truth, Beefeater was like that, often saying that men her age were like boys.

“I’ll also throw this out ahead of time, we’re low on fuel because we rushed over here. But I’ll stay until you give me a good answer, Ken-san!”

“Oi, dumbass, what are you—”

“That’s right. If you don’t give me a proper answer, I’ll crash. Then it’ll be on you, Ken-san! Alright, now give me a good answer. Hurry! Hurry!”

Kengun grabbed his head.

He was negotiating with a terrorist who had Kurihama, the copilot in the back seat as a hostage. And his aim was to get a date... Letting a fighter craft crash for that reason would be the height of stupidity. No, Kamikoda was a man who delighted in such foolishness.

As Kengun grabbed his head, he imagined Kurihama’s face.

“I, I understand. However, I’m only going to put you in contact with them, I’m not going to take responsibility for what happens after that.”

As he said so, his head ached as he wondered how he would explain this to Beefeater.

Given his linguistic skills, it was very difficult to convey difficult concepts to Beefeater. He could express his thoughts without having to say too much because she was honest and straightforward.

Therefore, gathering the girls would probably be very difficult. It was almost certain to cause needless misunderstandings, and there was no telling how much effort would be needed to sort those out. Just the thought of it frightened him.

“Wonderful! Thank you, Ken-san! All I need is the chance to meet them; the rest is all up to me. I’m going to do my best! Let me know the details later!”

After saying so, Kamikoda ceased his orbiting and soared lightly above the clouds, leaving the combat airspace.

“He, he’s a monster.”

Kengun sighed and allowed the pilot to set the helicopter down. After that, he checked the time to see if they could still fight.

“That said, we’ve got some breathing room now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Below him, they saw the chain nets stuck in the tree canopy and the wounded moving amidst the wreckage of helicopters which had been brought down by Wyverns. While there seemed to be walking wounded, there had been fatalities among the JSDF servicemen and the Elbe Kingdom's soldiers, and the 4th Combat Group might have trouble conducting combat operations.

Kengun alighted from the landed helicopter and looked back at one of his men as he ran over.

"What's our casualty status?"

"My apologies. We're still doing a rough tally, so please wait a while."

"A rough tally is fine... I don't need numbers. Give me a timeframe."

Kengun's subordinate wrinkled his eyebrow and replied:

"While we're still combat capable, we'll need about half a day to recover and evacuate the wounded."

Kengun looked like he had chewed on something bitter.

"Really now. I understand. In any case, make haste to recover and send our wounded back to the rear."

"Roger."

Even without explicit instructions to do so, his men were carrying out rescue operations like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Kengun knew this, but he had deliberately given those orders because he was going to allocate more resources to rescue and recovery under the pretext of abandoning further combat operations. However, a young staff officer who had just graduated from officer academy saluted him with a terribly pale face.

"What is it?"

"Lieu, Lieutenant-colonel... things are bad."

"What is it? Don't tell me Pina-denka's gotten so bored that she's turned hysterical?"

"No, that's not it. Ah, that, er, that is..."

The young staff officer in charge of intelligence could not clearly explain in

chaotic conditions and his reply was garbled. His forehead — as well as the rest of his body — were soaked in a great deal of sweat. He was clearly confused, and it was almost pitiable. Kengun passed beyond reproach and found himself feeling sorry for him, so he suppressed the impulse to yell at him and slowly said:

“I understand. In any case, just start from the beginning, from the old to the new....”

“All, alright. I got it. Then, uh, I’ll go by chronological order. First, the ‘chef’ we positioned in Zorzal’s staff has reported that the Imperial Army is on Count Formal’s domain.”

“U~mu, as I thought.”

After hearing Kengun’s reply, the staff officers exclaimed in sincere surprise.

“You expected this!?”

“It was one of the first things I anticipated.”

His staff officers laid out a map of the surrounding area, and circled Kengun’s vicinity.

Kengun pointed at a brown mountainous region.

“Zorzal probably crossed over to House Formal’s territory through here, right?”

The path on the map was long and risky, noted the staff officers.

“Why didn’t the chef tell us while they were along the way?”

“I guess he was hiding in the cargo or something, so he didn’t know about the outside conditions, I guess? In that case, he wouldn’t know where he was until he reached his destination.”

“Still, shouldn’t they have been spotted by our recon people?”

“The surrounding forest is very thick, so even aerial recon photos wouldn’t have picked them up. Also, once we began battle preparations, our recon efforts were focused on enemy sectors, and other sectors were... also, there was no enemy activity in this region, so there wasn’t much information

collected.”

“How about recon drones? Wasn’t there a plan to use those? What happened to them?”

This could be read as a slight on the intelligence officer, who immediately responded:

“We weren’t issued any Global Hawks, and even if we were, we’d need satellite communication infrastructure to make them work. They could operate drones in the Afghan and Pakistani skies because they could use military satellites for real-time control. We don’t have those in the Special Region, so it would be pointless even if we possessed drones..”

(TL Note: the RQ-4 Global Hawk is a recon drone)

That was why the JASDF had sent the old F4 Phantoms to the Special Region.

It was not simply because it would not be a waste if they were destroyed, but it was also because they had considered that there might be a need for aerial combat, air strikes, reconnaissance and various other activities, and they had the advantage of being usable even without a complete communications infrastructure.

Kengun asked the intelligence officer a question:

“How about Italica? How did Pina-denka react?”

“Ah, yes! According to Lieutenant Yanagida, the legitimate government forces are doing battle outside the city.”

“Good, I expected nothing less of Pina-denka. She knew what to do.” After that, he slapped his knee hard and shouted.

“We will all proceed to Italica immediately! Leave behind the necessary personnel to treat and evacuate the wounded! Everyone else will proceed to Italica to crush Zorzal!”

There was no doubt or hesitation in the JSDF’s judgment and actions. One could say that Kengun’s speedy decision was taken right from the textbooks.

None of his staff officers objected and they nodded as one. Everyone understood that the objective of this battle was to destroy Zorzal.

“Commander Kengun, what’s happened? To think you’re returning all of a sudden... after we’ve come all this way!”

King Duran was limping along on his prosthetic legs as he used a dragonlance as a crutch. He was trailed by several soldiers of the Elbe Kingdom.

“Oi, Kurata! Please translate!”

Kengun summoned Sergeant Kurata and ordered him to translate, then saluted Duran.

“Your Majesty, we have just received a report that Zorzal has led an army to attack Italica. Our target has suddenly come to a place we can reach.”

“What are you saying...?”

“We will be proceeding to Italica with all speed to attack Zorzal. Will you be joining us, your Majesty?”

“Of course I will! The rest of you, gather everyone who can still move! Hurry!”

Duran ordered the lightly wounded to aid the wounded, and then he gathered those of his men who were still fighting fit and had them board the helicopters.

The men’s spirits soared immediately, in anticipation of the final battle, but the staff officer from earlier, looking quite ill-at-ease, tugged on Kengun’s sleeve and said:

“Sir, I’m not done yet. There’s more important news.”

“What, there’s more? Still, this is hardly a disaster. Why do you look so worried?”

“Sir. Actually, the ‘Idaten’ order was just given.”

“Wh-what!? Idaten!? Why didn’t you tell me that first!”

Even Kengun could not stop himself from shouting any longer. He seized the man’s collar in trembling hands.

“My apologies, Receiving all that news at once was a little overwhelming...”

The young staff officer seemed to be comparing himself to a low-end computer, suggesting that he had taken in too much at one go.

As he felt his head begin to ache, Kengun lowered his volume in order to bank the flames of his rage.

“Are you sure you’re not mistaken?”

The young staff officer wiped the sweat on his forehead as he glanced at the notes in his hand, and read from them.

“No, there’s no mistake. The situation is Idaten, and the order to prepare for a retreat has been given. I’m sure of it.”

An Idaten situation... that was one of the potential developments predicted by the government’s emergency countermeasures manual that they had compiled before dispatching the Special Region Expeditionary Force. It was an order issued if there were any abnormalities with the Gate, or if any strange phenomena occurred, which might cause communications between Japan and the Special Region to be cut off. All personnel dispatched to the Special Region would drop whatever they were doing and prepare to retreat with all speed.

In other words, it was a general retreat readiness order, issued when there was a hole in the bottom of the ship and everyone was ordered to prepare to abandon ship even as they tried their best to bail the water out, because they did not know if the vessel could be saved. In addition, the order “White Rabbit” signalled a general retreat. Everyone in the Special Region Expeditionary Force would have to flee back to Japan.

“Why is this happening when we’re so close!”

The order meant that they would have to give up the victory that was so close at hand after what had surely been a great deal of sacrifices. The servicemen’s fists trembled, unwilling to accept that fact.

“Sir, we’re so close! It’s just a little more!”

Kurata, the translator assigned to Kengun’s helicopter, refused to let that go.

“An Idaten situation means there’s a problem with the Gate. If we drag our feet, we might be stranded in the Special Region and be unable to return. We

need to return to Arnus right away.”

“But they haven’t given the White Rabbit order yet! In that case, can’t we settle it now? All we need to do is get to Italica in the meantime and take Zorzal’s head!”

“But if they do issue the White Rabbit order, that means the Special Region will be like a sinking ship. We need to get our life vests on so we can jump into the ocean at any time; we don’t have time to waste on wandering around the bottom of the boat!”

“Then what about Italica? How about the Crown Princess and her people? Aren’t Persia and the other people in House Formal fighting hard because they believe we’ll rush to their rescue!?”

The leading private beside Kurata whispered, “Sergeant, you probably shouldn’t say that.”

“What do you mean? Are we supposed to just ignore what happens to another world and its people?”

“No, that’s not it. I’m just saying that there’s no way the Colonel doesn’t feel anything about this.”

Beefeater had pursued Kengun aggressively, and he had resisted to the end, but eventually, he had slowly come to have feelings for her. Everyone in the 4th Combat Group knew that. Of course, Kurata knew that too; he felt camaraderie with Kengun for finding love in the Special Region. Therefore, he felt like he had been betrayed.

“In that case, why don’t we just go for it!? What kind man watches women die without doing anything? Don’t you think so too, Colonel!?”

Kengun fell silent for a while, and listened to Kurata’s spiel, Then he nodded in stern approval.

“Indeed, that is true.”

“In that case—!”

“But even if that was the case, that is merely my personal opinion. Maybe you have all prepared yourselves to stay here, but the others have not. We can’t

involve everyone because of us.”

Kurata could not rebut those words.

“I understand. Then I’ll go, even if it’s by myself! Please let me go!”

After saying so, Kurata grabbed a rappelling cord. However, the men around him immediately grabbed him and said “Don’t be foolish.”

“Let me go! I’ve already applied to stay! I’m okay with remaining here! Let me go! Let me go!”

Kengun turned his back to him and told his men to “shut him up”. The pilot asked, “Is this alright?” and Kengun replied, “Hurry up.”

The Idaten Situation message spread throughout the JSDF personnel working within the Special Region.

This applied to the teams working with local collaborators to search for resources and agents assigned to infiltrate enemy territory. Upon receiving that order, anyone who was not in Arnus would have to prepare to return.

In addition, the retreat readiness order had also reached Sugawara, who was stationed in Italica.

He slept in a converted corner of the warehouse, and he tilted his head to listen to the order which came from the wireless transmissions device on the rickety table.

On the bed behind him was Sherry, dressed for travel and loading her luggage into a cabinet. She had already received documents signed in the Emperor’s name, and after this she would be setting out from Italica.

“Are you so afraid to go to Japan?”

“Are you pretending you didn’t notice?”

Sherry looked at Sugawara with tear-reddened eyes.

Faced with a crying girl, Sugawara mustered up the gentlest face he could manage. He knew that Sherry was weeping because she would be separated

from him. However, pointing it out would only serve to embarrass her.

“Well, of course I’d say I was scared if you asked. After all, I’ll be parting ways with you for a while, Sugawara-sama.”

“It’s just...”

Just for a while

, Sugawara could not bring himself to say the other half of that sentence.

“Sugawara-sama? Is something the matter?”

Sherry looked straight at Sugawara.

Girls were very intelligent. Her teenage sensitivity clued her into a slight change in him.

Even Sugawara, a trained foreign affairs official, had to spend a lot of effort to bluff his way through. As a result, Sugawara did his best not to hide anything from Sherry or lie to her. That was because he did not want to see the hurt and sad look on her face when she saw what he was actually thinking.

Similarly, Sherry felt sad about inconveniencing Sugawara. Thus, they had come to a conclusion — since both of them felt bad about each other, then they ought not to lie to each other from the beginning. Yet, it was only now that he found himself unable to speak the truth.

“I’ll be going out for a bit.”

“The area near the manor house should be quite dangerous, no?”

“I’m going over to Lt. Yanagida. I won’t go near the Count’s estate, it’ll be fine.”

Sugawara mentioned Yanagida’s name to calm her down. However, Sherry began making a fuss as she heard his name,

“I don’t like him.”

“Sherry, you can’t say that. I’m starting to worry about handing you to him.”

“But he always bullies you, Sugawara-sama.”

Sherry knew that Yanagida made fun of Sugawara for his relationship with

her. She felt guilty that Sugawara was embarrassed over the fact that she was so young. Even so, she had no desire to pull out of the arrangement, and the surge of distaste that welled up was instead transferred to Yanagida.

“He’s just jealous that I get to be so close to a young and cute girl like you.”

“But I can’t just...”

Sherry puffed up her cheeks. Sugawara poked her bouncy cheeks with a fingertip.

“In any case, I’ll be visiting him. I’ll be back soon, so prepare to move out before then.”

Saying so, Sugawara ran to the JSDF outpost in Italica, where Yanagida was stationed. There, Yanagida and his men had already begun preparations to flee.

“Lieutenant Yanagida! Is that Idate order really true...?”

“Oi, feed this document into the shredder. Mm, good timing, Sugawara. Help me get that bag.

Yanagida rose from his wheelchair with a grunt of effort and began sorting out his luggage.

While he had recovered to the point where walking was no longer a problem, it would seem that he would need helpers if he wanted to continue working like this. Sugawara took his bag and tossed it over to Yanagida.

“Is there nothing we can do about the Idate order? Like say, asking General Hazama to revoke it or something?”

“Please don’t say things that will make things difficult for others. The emergency countermeasures manual was drafted by the Cabinet. Even General Hazama can’t just disobey it if he wants. This is what they call civilian control of the military. You should be subject to it as well, even as a member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.”

“But if we retreat, what’ll become of the legitimate government forces here? How about the Crown Princess-denka? They’re fighting for their lives because they believe JSDF reinforcements are coming, no?”

Sugawara had befriended everyone of importance in Italica in both a

professional and personal capacity. It was only natural that he would resist the idea of abandoning them and fleeing.

Yanagida did not answer right away. He took a deep breath and exhaled his answer.

“Of course I’m worried about them. But since they’ve given the Idaten order, there won’t be any more reinforcements. I guess everyone will be chopped to bits by Zorzal after he wins. Be it Pina-denka, the nobles and councillors here, or all the members of House Formal, it’ll be the end for them.”

As Yanagida delivered that dispassionate reply, Sugawara approached him.

“Are you really okay with that, Yanagida?”

“I’m a JSDF serviceman, so all I can do is obey the orders I’m given. That’s because my life won’t end in this new world. The HMMVs are already prepped. You ought to prep soon, Sugawara. Don’t you have a lot of documents to clean up?”

“No... I want to stay.”

“That’s no different from suicide.”

Sugawara accepted the cigarettes and lighter that Yanagida offered. He leaned against the table and lit up, then exhaled a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling before speaking.

“Still, there’s all sorts of problems on this side too. Since I’ve chosen to be an expert on the Special Region, I can’t change my course now. Do you think a diplomat in charge of handling the Special Region will have any work to do if he cuts off all his ties with the country of the Special Region?”

“When you put it like that, it does seem to be the case...”

Officials without a job typically met tragic ends.

They would pat him on the shoulder and then fire him. He would have to join a company and fill in documents all day. He would not be able to work in the place where he was employed. To someone who saw his job as his life, it was the same as being thrown into prison. Sugawara would rather die than go through that.

“Of course, I also have the nation’s interests at heart. When they open the Gate again, any foreign affairs official, no matter how skilled he is, will have a hell of a time once someone points out that the Japanese left the legitimate government to die. But if I stay to show the world our good side, we’ll be able to strengthen ties instead. It’ll also improve my position.”

“If you were a JSDF man, I’d drag you back by force. But you’re from another organization. I have no authority over you.”

“I’m grateful that you understand me.”

“I think you’re a model Japanese diplomat.”

Yanagida patted Sugawara’s shoulder in praise. However, his face took on a teasing expression as he drew closer to add to his words.

“Still, even if you’re okay with it, how about your young bride? Wasn’t she supposed to go to Japan as an ambassador? This might be the last time you see her, you know.”

“Well, I’ve already entrusted her to my family. I’ve already written the letter, so please help me send it.”

“Won’t they reject her?”

Surely his family members would be unhappy if an underage girl came to their doorstep and said, “I’m Sugawara’s wife.” That was what worried Yanagida. For a young girl, it was simple bad luck that she would have to spend her crucial years with unfamiliar adults.

“My dad would welcome her with open arms if he knew she was a countess of Imperial nobility. He’d probably send her off to some kind of finishing school to teach her how to be a bride. After all, he could proudly say, ‘my son’s wife is a noble countess, that means our family will be ennobled too’. And my mother’s always wanted a daughter. They’ll be happy to have her. Don’t worry about that.”

“I understand. In that case, leave it to me. But you’ll have to tell her you’re not going with her.”

There were also things like living expenses, raising expenses, school fees and

other things which irked him. Yanagida had the feeling that he had lost here. Perhaps niggling over small details like who should stay with her and who she would be handed to was not a good thing. It was more important to do things without considering the consequences.

Delilah had been watching them from the corner of the room, her eyes gleaming a dull blue. After watching Sugawara leave to persuade Sherry, he called out to her in a half-joking tone.

“What’s with those eyes? Envious of Sherry-chan?”

“Hmph. Going to Japan is just a waste of effort. I’ll wait here for you to return, Master.”

“What’s this, not coming with me?”

After that, Delilah leaned forward.

“No, I told you before, I dislike it. If you want me to go, then I’ll follow, Master. But won’t it give you problems?”

“Don’t worry about that. There’ll be a way. Even if there’s no way, we’ll think about it once you’re there. Therefore, are you coming or not?”

Delilah’s gloomy expression changed in an instant as he shouted:

“Of course I want to go!”

“...What did you say, Yanagida? Please say again.”

“The Idaten order has been given. Did you hear me? Do you need me to repeat myself?”

Furuta, the chef hidden near Zorzal, had also received the order.

“No need, order received. Still, it’ll be very troublesome for me to leave this place right away...”

Furuta had hidden himself in the narrow spaces between a couple of large wooden crates, and he poked his head out to survey the situation.

Zorzal’s army was attacking Pina’s army, which had its back to Italica, and they

were in the base camp at the rear.

An army physician approached a casualty with a pair of red hot pliers to pull an arrowhead out of a soldier who had been shot in the face, and the wounded man screamed in agony.

At the same time, one of the supply troops unloaded bundles of arrows from a transport wagon. Simply put, he was in the midst of the enemy.

He had stowed away in a cargo crate in order to see what Zorzal was up to, but this was the end of his luck. He knew that there would be no way to exit the crate until he reached this place, but by the time he realized it, he was on the battlefield.

“I’ll wait until you return. You must escape, no matter how you do it.”

“Ah, yes, Roger.”

Furuta ended his transmission and tucked his handset back into his pocket, then waited for a chance to help the supply troops carry arrows. While his kanto was in tatters, it still resembled the clothing of the menial laborers who did odd jobs in the army, so nobody was suspicious of him.

As he walked at the end of the line of supply troops, Furuta looked around and considered how he could escape Zorzal’s camp.

As expected, the security at the camp’s rear was thinner. However, as he took a step that way, a shrill voice rooted him in place.

“Oi, you over there! Where are you going?”

Crap, they’re onto me!

Furuta froze, his sweat glands opened to maximum aperture and perspiration flowed forth.

“Over here, come here.”

A centurion in shiny armor beckoned Furuta over.

“Un-understood.”

Frankly speaking, he did not want to go over to them, but Furuta considered that standing there silently without moving would only make him more

suspicious, and so he approached the centurion with his burden.

“Sir, is something the matter?”

“These arrows need to go here. Come with me.”

“Er, yes.”

Furuta jogged after the centurion.

“This shooting exchange is really rough. I know it’s hard on you too, but you need to show that you’re a good worker. This way, you’ll have a chance to become a proper soldier of the glorious Imperial Army...”

It would seem the centurion had not been suspicious of Furuta when he called out to him. More than that, he was full of appreciation for him.

In order to avoid further suspicion, Furuta played along with the centurion and replied, “Yes sir, I’ll do my best.”

“Mm, good answer.”

It would seem this centurion was no ordinary centurion, because the assorted soldiers who followed him, the sentries, and even the officers all saluted him.

“Primus Pilus Borhaus!”

“What is it, Optio!?”

Looking back, he saw another man in a centurion’s uniform running over to them.

“Please do something about those demihumans!”

“What’s wrong? They’re simply doing as his Highness ordered.”

“Well, did you know the men can’t stand them? After all, our enemy is Pina-denka’s knight band. They’re all thinking with their dicks and as a result, they’re unconsciously going easy on them. It’ll be terribly foolish if the enemy seizes on that and kills them in turn.”

The frontliners all wanted to capture the lady knights alive. Therefore, it was only to be expected that their attacks with blade and spear slowed down. If the enemy exploited this weakness and attacked, the Imperials would end up taking heavy losses.

Borhaus groaned and nodded.

“Just order them to show no mercy, however fine a woman they see.”

“Primus Pilus. You do know that’s impossible, right?”

War was a situation where one’s life was in danger, which stimulated the instinct to continue the species and reproduce, so men often desired women no matter the consequences. These situations would happen no matter what measures they took. “They’ve gotten horny just standing by, so it was obvious how they would feel and act once they were pitted against female soldiers,” said the optio.

Borhaus sighed deeply, and he turned to a different direction with an annoyed look on his face.

“Sir...?”

“You wait here.”

Borhaus might have said so, but Furuta followed behind him. That was because he felt that he would not have to worry about being questioned and suspected if he followed someone that everyone knew.

“Why are you following me? Didn’t I tell you to wait?”

“But sir, if I wait there, another commander might ask ‘why are you slacking off’ or something.”

Borhaus felt that Furuta’s words were reasonable, and he replied, “In that case, you can follow me,” and permitted Furuta to accompany him.

After walking for a short period, they reached a farm shed that was almost rotted through. As they drew close, they could hear feminine moans and cries.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s exactly as you’re hearing.”

As a steady, rhythmic sound reached their ears, Furuta felt the urge to leave. It might have been what it was like to watch a movie or TV show with one’s parents and know that they were about to reach a sex scene.

“Ah... we’re in the middle of a battle, aren’t we?”

Borhaus had a resentful look on his face as he replied:

“His Highness’ orders. They’re carrying out torture.”

“What are you trying to find out?”

“Nothing. It’s just to make her suffer.”

Borhaus spat those words out unhappily and approached the shed door.

“Strange, nobody’s on watch.”

They looked in from the door. Borhaus went “ah” as he stood in place.

That was because the scene in the room was completely different from what he had imagined. No, he had expected this. However, the scale was completely different from what he had thought.

“Come on! Next! Who’s next?”

For starters, the position of the interrogator and interrogated were reversed. That was because the men had been drained utterly dry and were collapsed on the floor in exhaustion.

The female looked down in contempt at the collapsed, motionless men.

“What’s this, done already?”

Please... spare us...”

A man who still seemed conscious was kneeling by a wall, trembling as though he was waiting in line to be executed.

What a pathetic excuse for a man. You’re useless. You’re a fucking disgrace. Still, as long as I use my tricks, even a man like that...”

Tyuule approached the man, who was trembling nonstop, and there was a bewitching look on her face as she whispered into his ear. She touched him with both hands, teased him, and writhed like she was taunting him. She used the tip of her tongue, and then her entire body. His shrivelled, unresponsive manhood immediately returned to life, but the man instead wailed piteously.

“Ah! Please, stop! I’m at my limit!”

“Really now. That’s not what your cock is saying. Come, tell me. What’s Bouro

up to?”

“I don’t know! What would a mook like me know!?”

“You’re bluffing. Since you’re a mook, you ought to be watching what your superiors are doing, and what they’ve done. If you use your head, you ought to be able to figure something out. Now tell me everything you know! Talk!”

“I got it, I’ll talk. Just hang on, please... Bouro wants the Haryo to enter the Imperial bloodline. He’s been trying all kinds of ways and means to get a Haryo girl to bear Zorzal-sama’s child... after that, once he removes all the human heirs from the imperial family, the Haryo will take over the Imperial bloodline. Bouro told all the girls to serve Zorzal-sama.”

“But the fact is, his Highness has me by his side. And he has a bunch of female slaves too, no?”

“Bouro didn’t count on that. He didn’t think Zorzal-sama would end up favoring you.”

“And so, Bouro approached me, right?”

“Yes. That means you’ve been used by him... ah, urk. guhhh...”

The man was probably unable to breathe. He clutched his chest, the eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed.

“Ara, is that all?”

Tyuule looked at the unresponsive man like he was some base and despicable object. Given that he had probably been drained dry of semen, the man relinquished his last dregs of life and died.

“Honestly, these people... still, you did better than Zorzal. I’ll praise you for that.”

Perhaps she was feeling satisfied after gaining the information she was looking for, but Tyuule smiled and rose to her feet.

Every step Tyuule took resounded with the clinking of chains. Both her hands and feet were heavily shackled.

Perhaps Tyuule had sensed the presence of someone by the door, because

she raised her head.

“Ara, if it isn’t the Primus Pilus Borhaus. Are you here to question me too?”

Tyuule turned a razor-sharp glare on Borhaus, like she was taking aim at him, and walked past him.

Perhaps Borhaus had been frightened by her aura of lewdness, because he arched his upper body back.

“No, that sort of interrogation would be a bad influence on the men. I wanted to tell them to do this outside the camp... but it seems it’s over. That’s good.”

Borhaus could not completely hide the fear in his heart, and his voice seemed to have changed.

“Indeed. After all, there aren’t any more men here who can give me a hard time. What shall we do? Why not fulfil the orders Zorzal-denka gave, Primus Pilus?”

“No. I’m not a fan of seeking out women before battles.”

“How principled. Still, I like men like that.”

“I am honored. However, this isn’t the time for that sort of thing.”

Borhaus pushed Tyuule’s shoulders back, and he reached for an axe from the side. He held down the shackles on her wrists and began pounding them.

Several metal links which composed the shackles bounced away.

“What’s the meaning of this?”

“I told you before, no? I dislike this sort of thing. Go flee wherever you want.”

However, Tyuule looked lazily around and said, “It’ll be hard for me to run like this, even if you tell me to.” She was completely naked.

“Do you have water? I’m thirsty.”

“It’s just water, find it yourself.”

“Well, I don’t mind walking around like this to find water. But won’t it be a bad influence on the men?”

Tyuule displayed her body to Borhaus as she said, “like this”, implying that he

should go find her some clothing.

“Oi, do you have anything to wear or to cover up her body?”

Borhaus looked back and addressed that question to the supply soldier following him. He knew that supply troops ought to have spare uniforms and clothes which could be used to cover up a body. However, it had an unexpected effect on Tyuule.

“Ah, Tyuule-san... nice to meet you.”

Furuta had a bitter smile on his face, as though he had no idea what face he should make. A bitter smile was all he could manage. After seeing a girl he liked having sex with other men, his envy, his anger, his pity, and all his emotions blended together, and after his shock passed, he stood frozen in place... and the sum total of all that was Furuta’s bitter smile.

And then, Tyuule saw Furuta’s expression. A look of shock filled her face and she fell to her knees with a scream.

“NOOO!”

She hid her body with her arms and turned around, weeping and crying, “No, don’t, please, please don’t look at me!”

“Go over there! Don’t look! Please!”

After seeing a hitherto indomitable woman transform into a fragile beauty in an instant, Borhaus could not help but look at Furuta, the source of all his suspicions.

“And so, what happened?”

After receiving news of an emergency, they began a safety meeting under the Prime Minister’s residence. The message they had received said that it would begin at 1300 hours, and the officials ran over, huffing and puffing, seeking an explanation from the incident resolution committee members.

After organizing his data, the threat management overseer answered them.

“At 9:58am this morning, near the crossroads at Central Ginza 4-chome, a portion of the 3000 attendees of the international NGO ‘We demand compensation for the foreign victims of the Ginza Incident and the liberation of the Special region’ broke free of police control and began rioting. They attacked trucks leaving the Ginza Garrison and stole their cargo, while brawling with the police officers sent to arrest them. This disturbance affected the entire NGO and they began acting up, using thrown rocks and placards as weapons. While our riot units responded with water cannons and the like, the NGO members sealed off the Ginza Garrison and refused to leave. The NGO demanded that we agree to allow the Gate to be communally managed by the United Nations and that the Empire pay compensation to the foreigners killed during the Ginza Incident, saying that they would not leave the Ginza Garrison unless their demands were met. They also said that if we did not settle the problem through negotiation and used forceful methods, they would destroy the Gate.”

“So you’re telling me that they took over the Ginza Garrison!? Why couldn’t you stop a bunch of unarmed rioters? Why did you allow them to enter the interior of the dome!?”

Chief Cabinet Secretary Kogure rose to his feet and bellowed at the threat management overseer. However, the deputy chief of the police force calmly replied to Kogure, like it was not his problem at all.

“While we have not confirmed it yet, there are reports that some of them possess automatic firearms and rocket launchers, explosives, and other weapons.”

“Say what!? Where did they even get those from!?”

Natsume’s face indicated his exasperation at the National Safety Committee Chairman’s ignorance as he explained.

“Japan has a very long coastline, and small boats can approach from any angle. Smuggling weapons into the country is also possible. How do you think North Korea managed to kidnap their victims? During the Great Hanshin Earthquake, we found automatic firearms and mortars in buildings belonging to a certain organization. It was quite famous. Didn’t you hear of it?”

“That’s the first time I’ve heard of that. But in that case, it’s only to be expected that the riot police couldn’t handle them. But surely the JSDF ought to be a different case. What was the JGSDF doing!?”

Kogure turned the hammer of his wrath from police to the JSDF, and pointed to the head of the JSDF’s Chief of Staff

“Not all the rioters were armed. At first, we assumed that they were unarmed civilians, and so we had to avoid opening fire. After that, the opposition used human wave tactics to swamp and overcome us. That was what happened.”

“What the hell! What are your men carrying guns for? Couldn’t you just have shot them!?”

Slacking off on threat management was human error, so he could let it slide, but he could not simply ignore an attempt to push the blame to people on the scene, and so Natsume reproachfully interrupted Kogure:

“Don’t spout that unrealistic nonsense. How can you open fire indiscriminately when you can’t tell the difference between rioters and civilians who were caught up in the matter and who are begging for help? If they did so, we’d be damned for ‘massacring civilians’. We should be praising them for retreating before something like that happened.”

It would seem the representatives from the police and the Coast Guard approved, because they both nodded.

That was because they would have done the same thing in their position.

When ambushed and unable to respond effectively, one ought to draw a line and then fall back. Then they ought to keep the situation from expanding beyond that line while gathering information on the situation and the enemy. After that, they could mount a counterattack. One could say it was a basic response to any surprise attack.

“Still, the situation ended up like this as a result. Natsume-kun, this is arguably your responsibility.”

“Oh yes. As the Defense Minister, I have no intention of shirking my responsibilities. However, I would like you to acknowledge that forbidding firearms use when arresting illegal fishing boats into our waters and only

begging us for help at times like this is extremely unreasonable.”

“Surely shutting down illegal enterprises is different from this sort of thing!”

“This is the same as going into denial when afraid and meeting opposition. If you wanted them to mount a credible response, then you should have granted the JSDF and coast guard personnel — who face all sorts of danger in daily life — the right to open fire when necessary and then taken responsibility after the fact in your capacity as a government official.”

“But we’re in an incident now, aren’t we!?”

“The rules of engagement on the other side of the Gate are different from over here. Over here, we allow our men to shoot when they have confirmed that the opposition is armed. But on the other hand, as long as we cannot be sure that the opposition is armed, we cannot quell them with military force. In addition, JGSDF personnel are not issued with nonlethal weapons. One or two people might be manageable, but do you honestly expect them to fight an entire mob with their bare hands?”

Now that Natsume had said that much, Kogure realised that his expectations had been quite ridiculous.

“No, I didn’t mean that.”

“Then please don’t make such unrealistic demands. Speaking of which, what about the support staff and servicemen within the garrison? Are they alright?”

「吧？」

The Chief of Staff looked to Natsume, as though seeking his approval, and nodded.

“Mm, yes. Most of them fled into the Special Region and they’re fine. Also, there was a report that about ten or so tourists came to the garrison looking for help and passed into our care. We had to protect those girls, so we couldn’t close the dome gates in time.”

“So, are those ‘ten or so tourists’ alright?”

“Yes, I heard they were unhurt. However, communications with the Special Region Expedition Force cut off halfway, and we can’t get a detailed

confirmation.”

“What do you mean by cut off?”

“It would seem the transmission cable was severed. By 10:35am, all forms of communication including fibre-optic were rendered unusable.”

“Why did they do something like that!?”

The deputy chief of the police replied:

“I feel it is best not to take this disturbance as a simple matter of an international NGO going out of control. A few of them exhibited very strange behavior, being organized and coordinated. They might not be in uniform, but they seemed just like an army — we’ve received reports stating as much from the scene. This was probably all planned out in advance.”

“In other words, that they had to guts to create a disturbance which would hold all 26’500 JSDF servicemen sent to the Special Region hostage?”

“I believe that would be the most appropriate way of looking at things, yes.”

Kanou and Natsume looked at each other.

“This is bad.”

“Ah, very bad.”

“What’s so bad about that?”

Finance Minister Hino moved up beside Kanou.

The JSDF Chief Staff Officer continued:

“In truth, the Special Region Expeditionary Force manuals state that in the event of any abnormality or the breakdown of communications with Japan, a retreat readiness order will be issued to all personnel in order to guard against unexpected circumstances. This is the current situation.”

The officials all rose at once.”

“A retreat order for the Special Region Expeditionary Force? Isn’t that a last resort?”

“Mm, that’s why I said it’s bad...”

Foreign Affairs Minister Kanou patted the photographs on the files he was holding.

“Let’s sort things out. The Ginza Garrison has been taken, is that correct?”

“Yes. While they have stopped looting and throwing stones, they are camped around the garrison and we cannot approach.

“In addition, they have taken the area between the Gate and this place. However, they have not approached the Gate itself — the area where our servicemen will open fire under any circumstances. Is that correct?”

The threat management overseer turned to Kanou again, and confirmed each of those items.

“Do we know the identity of the rioters?”

The deputy chief of police answered that question.

“According to the report from Public Safety, most of the protesters were Chinese, followed by Koreans. In order of the number of participants, the other nationalities are Russian, British, French, German, American, Australian, Hollanders, and others. They are made up of people working for NGOs, exchange students, tourists and so on... what’s this, what are anti-whaling protesters doing there?”

Upon hearing this, Kogure sighed.

“Why did the Public Safety Committee allow foreign protest groups to go to Ginza?”

“The representatives were Japanese, and they insisted on reparations to the foreign victims of the Ginza Incident. And there were

foreign casualties during the Ginza incident. That being the case, it made sense for foreign NGOs to be present.

“And you say there were Chinese tourists in there too?”

“There were also activists and exchange students. In addition, several Chinese tour groups entered the country recently, all of them composed of athletic

men, and apparently they were working in unison under a single representative. They were most probably at the heart of the disturbance.”

“Don’t tell me they’re from the PLA! What’s the Chinese government’s response?”

“Prime Minister Morita has summoned their ambassador for questioning.”

“They’re requesting that they want the Gate to be placed under the UN Security Council. Otherwise they’ll destroy the Gate... but can the Gate really be destroyed so easily?”

“Ah, apparently a truck driven at high speeds could cause a lot of problems depending on the angle it hit.”

“The Gate is simply a pile of rocks stacked up like cordwood. It’s not reinforced by concrete. You could probably wreck it with a bulldozer,” the threat management overseer said.

“Wouldn’t that make the Special Region Expeditionary Force drifters in another world?”

“The request for the UNSC and not China to supervise the Gate was truly cunning.”

After hearing Kogure speak, Natsume sighed.

“It’s all the same in the end, but playing the United Nations card means that they’re not doing this for their own country’s benefit, but to prevent Japan from monopolizing it. Things will be extremely tricky if major powers such as the US are all in on this.”

“That much should be obvious at a glance, no? There were people from all nationalities in that protest. Just like Kogure-san said, it would be better to assume some sort of collaboration between them.

The officials picked up the dossiers issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and read through them. The dossiers contained the simulated stance each country would take toward the situation.

“Korea and Russia have stated their firm support of Japan. They would demand that the Gate be taken from Japan by force. In turn, the UK, France,

Germany and the US would be in favor of forming an international organization to jointly manage the Gate, with Japan's consent. That country probably sent in the anti-whaling group for that purpose."

"That is to say, they're taking part in this just to stir things up, then?"

"Europe and America ought to be in favor of closing the Gate."

We're not talking about the same thing — Natsume said in response to Kogure.

"There is no country in the world which does not pursue its own interests. And there is no country in the world which takes what another country says at face value. Even so, they've accepted our proposal, because until now, we haven't given them any openings to exploit. Given China's actions, it's only natural they'll rush in to take advantage of any weaknesses we show them. If we make any mistakes here, the consequences will be very troublesome."

"Yes, that's where the problem lies. Personally, I feel there's no problem in destroying the Gate. How about it? Without the Gate, they'd have no reason to make demands, and the riots and public disturbance would stop as well."

All the other officials tensed up at once.

"You can't be serious, Kanou! What will you do about those 30'000-odd JSDF personnel and their equipment?"

"Regarding their equipment, they're all antiques scheduled for replacement, so losing them isn't a problem, no? Incidentally, we have

to close the Gate. Less predictable is the servicemen we will be stranding in place in the Special Region... and even that is not a permanent loss. While bringing them back will be very troublesome, all we need to do is imagine that they're exploring space or something. Also, they will be able to return one day. In any event, Miss Lelei has already agreed to assist us with that."

As Kanou's words reached their ears, and the members of the safety meeting took in his overly calm opinion, their stern faces gradually softened. They — who had panicked upon encountering the difficulty of the situation — had come

to realise that depending on how the situation developed, they would have to earnestly consider Kanou's suggestion.

Managing a national emergency was like performing surgery on a patient who had been infected by a flesh-eating virus.

Such viruses could invade the body through small scrapes and they spread by the minute, mercilessly killing and liquefying the cells in the victim's arms and legs. In order to save a life from such a threat, a doctor would need to boldly cut away at the affected region, and even slice off healthy tissue as well.

One could say that threat management was created to make the cruel decisions of how much and how many to sacrifice.

The whole could only be saved with quick decision-making. Delaying a decision in the hopes of saving the whole body would instead result in dearg.

Even if the patient later complained, "What the hell, wasn't it just a scratch?" and so on, the fact was that if the doctor had not taken action, the patient would have died. Therefore, it was essential to swiftly analyse the situation, steel one's heart, and take action with a firm will. Surely those who were abandoned would not be able to accept that, but there was no such thing as benevolent rule in this world. That was the true nature of governance.

Territory, people, resources and dignity. And then there were the lives of the JSDF and coast guard personnel.

Normally, all of them would be irreplaceable, but if placed in a situation where something had to be sacrificed, then they would have to draw up a priority list of what to keep and what to discard.

Naturally, when the time came to make a choice, there were many variables, such as the principles of the decision-makers, their priorities, the purpose of the organization, among other things.

For instance, a country's military apparatus would prioritize the ability to continue fighting and the country's safety above all others, and perhaps a humanitarian organization would prioritize lives at all costs.

The JSDF was a combat arm of the nation. The individual lives of each serviceman were thus lower on the priority list. Otherwise they would not allow

their personnel to fight the enemy.

Even so, it would seem it would be best to act and plan with their lives as the top priority, but that was because there was nothing more important than the lives of those personnel to weigh against them. Perhaps if one could put national security or the nation's interests on the balance, the servicemen's lives might be regarded as a necessary sacrifice, and they would be ruthlessly discarded as acceptable losses. Ultimately, all JSDF personnel had signed up knowing full well that their lives existed to be used in such a way.

Kanou's suggestion was to permit the personnel in the Special Region to be stranded there for an extended period.

This was something which had not been considered during the discussions on closing the Gate and holding onto their newly-acquired territory in the Special Region. That was because doing so implied that the servicemen would be bidding farewell to their families. However, in the face of the present circumstances, they had to consider the option of dividing up 30'000 families between two worlds, under the condition that they would be able to return one day.

Of course, both the nation and the service would support their families until they returned.

Living support and mental support went without saying. Even so, it would probably not be enough, and much hardship would result. However, they had to avoid a situation where their capital was taken over by a foreign army, at all costs. Thus, they had to decide and stick to a course of action.

No matter how things went, once the Gate was no longer around, the lure of the Special Region which had united all the other nations would no longer exist.

Perhaps it had been because of Kanou, but the various officials came to a compromise about the situation and began making plans in their respective areas of responsibility. The Ministry of Finance would handle expenses, while Chief Cabinet Secretary Kogure would think about how to deal with the media.

"No, we can't even do that."

A voice which denied Kanou echoed through the entire meeting room.

Having finished his meeting with the Chinese ambassador, Prime Minister Morita entered the security meeting room with a tired expression on his face.

After Morita had taken his seat, Kanou asked:

“Morita-san, what happened?”

“The Chinese have hinted that Miss Lelei is safe. She might be in China.”

“Say what!?”

Without her, there would be no way to bring the 30'000 men and women back. It would be the same as losing their lives. It was a loss which was very difficult to stomach.

Kanou's suggestion had been a ray of light for them, but now the faces of the safety meeting's participants were overcast.

Chapter 4

After receiving a report about an armed Chinese group taking over the Ginza garrison, Prime Minister Morita convened a safety committee meeting and summoned the Chinese ambassador for answers.

“I would like an explanation for the events which occurred at Ginza.”

The fact that Morita was asking that question in a rarely-used harsh tone was a sign of his anger. However, since he was not accustomed to taking such a tone, that emotionally-charged statement was overly forceful and lacked finesse when it came to firing the first shot in a diplomatic conflict.

Ambassador Yang had a puzzled look on his face, and he shrugged off Morita’s wrath like a willow tree bending in the wind.

“And here I was worried about why you called me over so suddenly. Regarding the matter at Ginza, I’m afraid I’m not too sure what’s going on. What exactly is the problem here?”

Morita was visibly on the verge of losing his temper after seeing how blatantly he was feigning ignorance. He choked back his anger and did his best to remain calm as he said:

“Don’t play dumb with me! Do you mean to say you have no idea what’s happening in Ginza?”

“I hear an international NGO was mounting a protest. Many of our country’s citizens took part in it, but they were not the only participants. They say organizations from the US, France, Russia, Korea and other countries were also involved. May I ask why I am the only one to be summoned here? Must I be questioned so harshly?”

Morita tossed down a stack of photographs in front of the ambassador.

“See here, aren’t most of these Chinese nationals!? And they’re breaking the law and causing trouble. There have also been many casualties among the

police. This is not a protest. This is a riot!”

“Disturbances like these are not uncommon in my country. Also, I do not understand why you keep venting your frustrations on me.”

“How can you even say that after having your country’s people start riots in other countries!?”

“It seems there has been a misunderstanding of sorts. Then, I shall make myself clear. This incident has nothing to do with our government. The inciters of this riot are an international NGO, and while it is regrettable that our citizens have taken part in it, I believe Japan is a democracy. While they might be foreign nationals, I feel that Japan ought to listen to the opinions of free citizens.”

“So you’re saying that the Chinese government has nothing to do with this riot?”

“Of course. Or will I need to explain the definition of an NGO to you, Prime Minister-dono?”

“Let me get this out of the way first. According to reports, some of these rioters possess automatic small arms and rocket launchers.”

“What did you say? Did I misunderstand your Japanese? Could you say that again?”

“Then I will repeat myself. According to reports we have just received, some of the rioters who have taken the Ginza garrison where the Gate is located possess automatic firearms and other such armaments. They have made unlawful demands of our nation and declared that they will destroy the Gate if we do not comply, stranding the 30’000 JSDF servicemen who have been dispatched to the Special Region in another world.

But Ambassador Yang replied with an expression of surprise on his face:

“Is this true?”

“What do you mean, is this true?”

“I mean the fact that the international NGO in question is armed. Could it be that you’re trumping up false charges to suppress the rights of free citizens to

express their opinions?”

“There’s no basis for anything you’re saying, what are you getting at!?”

“Is that not true? Are there any news reports of armed rioters?”

“The interior of the garrison has been taken and nobody has been able to approach it yet. If the media personnel have not approached it yet, how could it possibly be reported on the news?”

“In that case, how can I believe what you are saying? How can the citizens of Japan and the citizens of the world believe you? If it has not been reported, it might as well not exist. Nobody will believe you. Before pinning the blame on us, please provide some concrete evidence first.”

“Guh...”

“Well, let us assume that things are indeed as you are saying, Prime Minister Morita, and that there are, in fact, armed people in there...”

“They are in there!

Yang had an exasperated look on his face as he continued addressing Morita in soothing tones.

“Assuming you were right, what did that international NGO demand?”

“That we turn over management rights for the Gate to the United Nations.”

“In other words, this means the international community is making a request of your nation, no?”

“Yes. That is true.”

“And how does the Japanese government intent to handle these armed miscreants?”

“Our country will not give in to terrorism. We will not negotiate with terrorists.”

“That is to say, the Japanese government will brand free citizens who have made a proper request as terrorists, and will thus quell them with violence and close the Gate by force?”

“The Japanese government has made its decision. It will not be altered.”

“However, you will need to eliminate those citizens first, and after eliminating these so-called armed citizens, you will then need to withdraw the troops you have dispatched to the Special Region before closing the Gate. Will that not require a great deal of effort?”

“The effort required is not a concern. We will do it if we must.”

“Still, if even a small mistake or error occurs, then the 26’000 JSDF servicemen who have been sent to the Special Region will be unable to return. Is that not so?”

Morita realized that Ambassador Yang had accurately stated the true number of JSDF personnel who had been dispatched to the Special Region. Most of the officials only knew about the rough figure of 30’000, so how had he learned that number? It ate at Morita.

“You do not have to worry about that.”

“Is that really alright? If you accept our country’s requests, then perhaps this matter can be peaceably resolved.”

“Is this a request from the Chinese government?”

“No, it is simply a humble suggestion which I am personally making. How about it? We hope you will not close the Gate, and allow our country to send 500’000 people over to the Special Region every year.”

“5-500’000!? Don’t be ridiculous. Allowing so many people to migrate over will immediately destabilize the Special Region. Or are you saying you want to conquer the Special Region and turn it into a second China?”

“While we do not plan on doing so, we cannot rule out the possibility. However, that would guarantee peace and stability on our side.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“Please consider our nation’s population of 1.3 billion people. That is a vast number. These 1.3 billion are a weapon for our country, but at the same time they are also a liability. This may be an extreme way of phrasing it, but a nation’s responsibilities include killing off the citizens of every other nation on the planet for the sake of the survival of one’s own citizens. We must feed 1.3

billion bellies and fill 1.3 billion hearts with hopes. For the sake of soothing our 1.3 billion people, our nation will gladly take resources and rations where we can find it, even if we are viewed as unreasonable, designated as villains, and hated by other countries.”

“What a pretty way of saying you’ll make trouble for others.”

“Of course, we’ve taken steps on our part to not let this figure of 1.3 billion grow any further, that is to say, the one-child policy. However, such a policy will cast our country’s future into darkness. You should know what will happen if the balance between the number of workers and the number of people that society can support is broken, given that you are the Prime Minister of Japan, which is an aging society.”

There was power in Ambassador Yang’s voice.

“If we can ease this burden, then our country can afford to be more gentlemanly members of the international community. Therefore, we must have Japan’s help, no matter what. Please allow us to migrate into the Special Region. If that can be realized, our nation will repay Japan’s sincerity with an extended period of peace by way of gratitude.”

Whether or not he was correct, the Chinese ambassador’s calm tone allowed Morita to cool down from his own agitation.

“In that case, we hope you will start by stopping your biased, anti-Japan education. The children of your country do not know of the aid we have rendered to your nation and curse us as ‘Japanese devils’.”

“There is no anti-Japanese education in our country.”

“Then there is nothing to talk about.”

Morita rose in preparation to attend the meeting, but the ambassador checked him.

“Every nation has organizations with their own demands, so having to stand in the middle of all of them must be an arduous task. To those on the right, the center leans to the left, and to those on the left, the center leans to the right, and so the center is attacked from both sides. The best way to understand this is through teaching history. One could say the people on the extreme left and

right are both very sensitive. What you call anti-Japanese education is commonplace and daily knowledge to us. If we change this, then we might be viewed as capitulating to foreign pressure. The government will be censured more intensely, and it might lead to internal unrest within the nation.”

“Even if what is being taught is clearly wrong?”

“Pardon me for citing another country as an example. In America, there are parties who debate about teaching creationism — a man-made, scientifically erroneous theory that derives from the Christian Bible — in school to educate the youth. To these people, the truth is irrelevant. That is because what they want is to teach the Bible they believe in to their children. This problem is in a similar vein to that one.”

“That said, we cannot tolerate being accused of doing things we did not do. Our first request will be to correct your anti-Japan curriculum.”

“This is a very challenging question. I cannot answer it right away. How about this — can we leave this problem for the future, as a sign of our aspiration for friendship?”

“Calling it an aspiration is probably for convenience’s sake. Our nation has acted with an eye for friendly relations until now, and we intend to continue doing so. This is how it has always been. Therefore, we have not blown up the matter of your country suddenly claiming the Senkaku Islands for your own. However, you have constantly betrayed our efforts. Even so, our nation has borne with it and made concessions in various areas.”

Ambassador Yang had an unhappy look on his face, and he seemed to have something to say. However, he put that aside and simply stated his own request.

“Therefore, you should be able to accept our request for the liberation of the Special Region. You keep saying that you have made concessions to us, but was it not for the benefit of maintaining friendship between our countries? In that case, you should be able to concede in this matter as well. In this way, there will be peace and perhaps even prosperity between our nations. Many Japanese companies have factories in our nation, and our nation is a major market for yours. Friendship is vital to allow these companies to do business smoothly and

to guarantee the safety of the Japanese citizens upon our soil. Therefore, your country ought to give in to us. If you do not do so, then once relationships with your nation turn frigid and unease builds, the peace between us will soon vanish. As a representative of your nation, are you saying that such a thing is permissible?"

"I have always hoped that such a thing would not come to pass."

"Hope alone will not make it a reality. One needs unrelenting effort. Our country would like the Japanese government to put in effort. If you do not want to strand those 26'000 servicemen of yours in another world, then you will do as ordered."

"What orders, who the hell do you think you are!? How dare you!"

"No, well, now that we're at this point, I'll speak plainly. While those protesters are demanding that the Gate be handed over to the UNSC, that would offer our nation far too few benefits. Our country wants to sign a treaty for mutual development of the Special Region."

"I refuse."

"If you are taking your hardline stance because you believe that you can recover those 26'000 JSDF personnel even if you close the Gate, I would advise you to reconsider. The girl who can control the Gate... Lelei, I believe she's called? You cannot do it without her."

Saying so, Ambassador Yang took out a bag in front of the Prime Minister. The bag contained Lelei's staff.

Morita had spoke with Lelei many times. He remembered her staff.

"This, this is! How did you get it!?"

"If you mean this staff, then I shall say that we obtained it through magic. In any case, all the Japanese government can do is comply with our nation's orders. Surely you understand Japan's situation now, no?"

"So what! Do it if you're going to do it!"

Morita very much wanted to shout his anger with those words.

But the weight of 26'000 lives would not allow him to do so.

Morita looked at the arrogant look of triumph on Ambassador Yang's face, and his body trembled with the rage he could not vent.

United States of America — White House.

President Dirrel, whose term was almost over, was currently agonizing about how to deal with the call from the Japanese Prime Minister. That was because the call was a critique of America: "Are you going to abandon an ally?"

"Certainly not. Our country will never abandon Japan."

"Then why did you align yourself with China when problems with the Gate and the Special Region came up? While I can understand why you sent that anti-whaling group over..."

"Let me get this out of the way first. To our country, the islands of Japan are our final defensive line in the Pacific Ocean against the expansion of China. The security policies of our nation and that of Japan are one. Therefore, we will not abandon Japan. Even if the Japanese government were to say that they had enough of it, we will not give up on the Japanese home islands. We will continue with this policy even during the reign of upcoming President Mahana. Therefore, please be at ease."

"I don't know whether those words are supposed to set my heart at ease."

Morita remembered that when Dirrel said they would not give up, he was not referring to either the Japanese government or the Japanese people, but the islands of Japan.

"This is the reality that the East China Sea and South China Sea now face. Maintaining a balance between ourselves and China for the sake of prosperity started from your father's generation, but it seems we've favored China too much and raised an unbelievable monster. There's a good lesson here; helping a neighboring country become strong won't turn out well."

“I know that, and so I do not regret it. However, America’s actions until now have also been quite problematic. Rather than correcting your own errors, your nation was overly eager to judge others and has invaded our country to solve your problems. In order to resist one-sided domination from your nation, our country has had to draw whatever strength we could from the surrounding nations.

“And the result of that was this... no, let’s not talk about that. After all, this is not a suitable place for discussing such things. We’ll talk about how our predecessors shaped the present some other time. What we need to be discussing is the fact that the monster we’ve raised has grown beyond our expectations. Now is not the time for maintaining a balance or anything. That’s because if the US and Japan are not united, we cannot maintain stability in Asia.”

“In that case, why did you choose to support China?”

“That is because when it comes to the Gate and the Special Region, economic matters are more important to our country than ensuring safety. Our nation also wishes to benefit from the Gate. Therefore, our nation feels that it would be more suitable for the Gate to be handed over to the permanent members nations of the UN than for Japan to monopolize all dealings with the Special Region.”

“But Minister Kanou has already explained the reasons for closing the Gate.”

“That news has filtered through you. It is quite worrying. Our nation would also like to mount an independent investigation on the matter which is standing in the way of your important negotiations. Therefore, we have offered Japan a proposal.”

“By important negotiations, you mean...?”

“I’m talking about the Gate, Morita. We cannot bear to know that you have monopolized the technology to open a passage to another world. I understand there is a being with superhuman intelligence at work here, But even if that were the case, we cannot tolerate being unable to have a say in the matter.”

“So you intend to manage the Special Region on your own?”

“The Security Council will manage it. That is because the best way to learn the truth is to uncover everything. For that reason, we have allowed the other nations to band together and make a somewhat forceful request of you. If you close the Gate, that will be an admission of your intent to monopolize it. If Mahana takes office under such circumstances, it will be a condemnation of the previous president.”

“Don’t you think this is a little out of line!?”

“Please don’t misunderstand. The disturbance in Ginza has nothing to do with our country. That is because I was only speaking of our nation’s foreign policy.”

“Why is it all the leaders of all the nations are saying the same thing?”

“That’s because it is the truth. The truth is the same no matter who speaks it.”

“I didn’t think even your explanations would be the same. What a surprise. It’s almost as though it had all been planned out behind our backs.”

“I have no intention of bandying semantics, but I do feel a little hurt.”

“And why is that?”

“It’s because you didn’t call me first. That way, you would have said all the other leaders were copying me.”

“We were delayed by the situation on our side. If you say that you had nothing to do with the incident in Ginza, surely you’ll also say you don’t know some of those rioters are threatening to strand the personnel we officially dispatched to the Special Region in another world?”

“Mm, no, not at all. I didn’t know about something like that. It’s really the first time I’ve heard of it. What happened? If you need help persuading the rioters to stand down, we can provide it.”

“No, there’s no need. That’s because it would be better to discuss matters with Ambassador Yang rather than call on another country for help.”

“Then please, by all means. However, I’d advise you to choose carefully regarding the disposition of the Gate. Don’t forget what it means for all the other countries to share the same opinion about the matter.”

“Mm. Of course. Then, have a good day, Mr. President.”

From where he was seated on an Oval Office sofa, the Presidential Secretary looked toward where his boss was talking to the Japanese premier, and he sensed Dirrel wrinkling his brow. He seemed unhappy.

“What happened?”

“Stirring up those NGOs and having them encircle Camp Ginza was well done, and I’m grateful for your hard work. But why did you send that anti-whaling group over?”

“The situation was urgent, and there were no other organizations which intended to protest Japan. Still, things are developing toward an interesting direction. If I’d known it would end up like this, I would have sent more agents over.”

“Things have drifted very far from what we planned at first.”

“External pressures. The plan was originally to insinuate ourselves into the matter and then slowly shut off their options, but it would seem China has done some scheming of their own.”

“The Chinese government seems to have made more demands of the Japanese government than what we arranged on.”

Naturally, the Presidential Secretary had overheard the contents of the telephone conversation, and his conclusion had been drawn from Prime Minister’s comment of

“It would be better to discuss matters with Ambassador Yang.”

“Morita called because he didn’t know how to proceed with negotiations, then?”

“He suggested that we band together for this, but now he’s trying to steal a march on us. It fits his style perfectly.”

“But surely this situation should not be a big problem for the Japanese government, given that they know how to open Gates, no?”

The White House had assumed Japan would be following Kanou’s proposal from the start. Therefore, they had decided not to push the Japanese government into a corner. One could say they were counterpointing China’s

actions.

“We should assume China is tightening the screws on Japan because they have an ace in the hole of some sort.”

“Yes. But in that case, we won’t be able to put ourselves between China and Japan and take a cut of the profits for being an intermediary.”

“Yes. If this keeps up, the Chinese government will think they can use us to test the waters and dispose of us afterwards.”

“And at the same time, they’ll have sown seeds of distrust between China and Japan.”

“A little quick on the draw, don’t you think?”

“Do you think we can salvage the situation by helping Japan? That call just now seems to be implying that they’re seeking aid.”

“No, don’t do anything until they come out and ask for our help. We should be verifying the nature of China’s trump card now. Investigate the matter with all the resources at your disposal. After all, that’s what we should be getting our hands on. I won’t be the master of the White House for long. At the very least, bringing this back ought to pave the foundation for another term.”

“Yes, boss. I’ll go right away.”

The Presidential Secretary nodded and rose. Dirrel said, “I’ll let you handle this” and watched the man leave.

“What did the President say, Prime Minister?”

Morita put the phone down, and Chief Cabinet Secretary Kogure immediately addressed him.

Morita turned a look of protest on Kogure, and then he glanced at Kanou and Natsume, who were seated on sofas in the corner of the office.

The two of them were waiting for Morita to compose his thoughts. Soon, Morita broke the silence and succinctly summarized the key points of the

situation.

“In truth, America’s cooperation with China isn’t going that well.”

“But of course. Any cooperation between those two countries is going to be like Hitler and Stalin. They might have entered an alliance of convenience, but that won’t last forever. That much is obvious given how they sent that anti-whaling group over by accident.”

“At first, I thought they would be trying to play on our anger at China’s demands to manipulate us into going for joint administration by the UNSC, instead of completely capitulating to China. However... the White House did not respond that way. Perhaps China is acting on their own.”

“Is that so. That would mean...”

Kanou smiled, the corner of his mouth tilting up.

“We should assume they don’t have Miss Lelei.”

“What!? How can you say that?”

Kogure was thoroughly confused as he exclaimed loudly. Natsume nodded to show his agreement with Kanou.

“That’s possible. The fact is, if China really had Miss Lelei, they would not need to bother themselves with the Ginza Gate.”

“You think so too, Natsume-san? I think that if they had Miss Lelei, they would not have started a disturbance like this, but secretly brought her back to Beijing and had her open a Gate wherever they wanted. Why didn’t they do that? Why did they start a riot instead? That’s because they don’t have Lelei-san.”

“I see.”

The rest of the Cabinet indicated their approval of Kanou’s reasoning.

“Of course, I doubt Lelei-san would gladly assist them even if they did seize her. Therefore, the aim behind China’s actions must lie elsewhere. But I cannot imagine what it is.”

If you don’t mind me saying

— Morita readjusted his glasses, which were on the verge of slipping, and

then spoke up.

“I don’t think that’s the case. I feel that there’s a high chance Lelei-san is in China’s hands.”

“Why is that?”

“That’s because the staff Ambassador Yang showed us was the real thing. The wood was the same as what Kogure saw.”

“Kogure? You still remember that?”

“Yes. Back then, I thought that it would be excellent material for a golf club. I’ve checked it before, so I’m sure of it.”

Kanou could not help laughing as Morita praised his own observation skills.

“Was the wood really that good, Prime Minister?”

“Yes, it looked better than persimmon wood.”

The Prime Minister and the Cabinet members spoke about things which did not suit the current atmosphere.

“In that case, what should we do? How did China get to her? How did they pass through the heavy security around the Gate and capture her!?”

Natsume still believed that Lelei had not been taken by China, and his exclamation could not have been more serious.

“There’s no point asking China how they got her staff. Besides, even if we can’t imagine how they got her, that doesn’t mean there was no way. Of course, it might be as Minister Kanou said and she might not be in China’s hands. However, making a decision like this is far too dangerous. After all, you could say this was something China did in order to mislead us.”

“However,” Kanou replied:

“While we might not have any information on this, don’t you think it would be worse to sit around and waste time? The disturbance might be over by the time we finish collecting intelligence, and then it’ll all be for naught.”

It was true that when lacked sufficient information, making hypotheses on top of other hypotheses was very dangerous. That was because once basic

assumptions were changed, the way one saw the situation might be turned around completely. Therefore, one ought to spare no effort in gathering intelligence of the highest accuracy possible.

Even so, there was no way to gather all the information possible during times of danger.

In an emergency, there were many situations where intelligence was both insufficient and inaccurate. It was the lot of those in charge to make decisions under these circumstances.

Even a grade-schooler could make a decision once they had all the necessary information at hand. The true test of a leader was bravely making a decision, and making the correct one, despite having inadequate knowledge of the situation.

The person in charge should not be charging into the heart of the disturbance to learn more, or do nothing until he learned more about the situation.

“That said, I’d still like more intelligence on this. It’s a shame that communications with the Special Region have been cut off.”

The disaster management overseer decided to summarize what they knew.

“In any case, it’s as the Prime Minister said; since Lelei-san’s staff is with China, there are three possibilities. One is that the staff is fake. Two, that they only obtained the staff. Three, that she is in their hands. However, whichever of these is the case, the fact that China is showing us the staff can only mean one thing — they want to delay our decision. China wants to stall for time.”

“Or perhaps they want us to think that way.”

“That’s true,” the overseer replied after hearing Natsume’s words.

“That said, what are they buying time for

? Each country to make an entrance? For their troops to show up? No, they should be trying to get into the Gate.”

“Is there no way to contact the troops in the Special Region?

“If we had line of sight to them, maybe we could use semaphore code or signal lamps with Morse code, or loud sounds and the like. But the Gate is

obscured by the dome, so all I can think of is sending a messenger over.”

Morita asked the Chief Staff Officer, “Isn’t there a way for us to pass through the Gate without being seen by that crowd of thousands...” and then he shook his head. “No, huh,” before rounding his shoulders.

However, that was when someone from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ran over with a pale face.

“What happened?”

“We’ve received reports that China has arrested four businessmen for taking photographs in a no-photography zone. Also, they’ve stopped processing the paperwork for all exports to Japan.”

And then, a man from the Coast Guard rushed in.

“The PLN is approaching the Senkaku Islands! They’ll be in our waters within a few hours!”

The Minister of Finance received a note. He read out its contents.

“It’s from the Ministry of Finance. There’s been major purchases of the yen, and its value is rapidly inflating. It’s probably currency manipulation from a Chinese fund! They might be trying to grow our debt by hundreds of millions!”

“There are large mobs protesting outside the Japanese embassy in China. The sheer amount of rocks and molotov cocktails thrown has caused the embassy to shut down. Japanese restaurants have also been attacked in Shanghai!”

“The ATM lines in various financial institutions have been hacked and are unable to function. We’ve lost the ability to transfer funds!”

“The JR train scheduling mainframe has shut down! The rail system is paralyzed!”

“They actually went that far!?”

After hearing this, Morita went pale, and he oozed limply from his chair to the ground.

If one allowed for a measure of inaccuracy... yes, while it was only about as accurate as blood-type personality theory, one could tell the personality of people who went into medical careers like doctors or nurses by the specialties they had chosen.

The best examples of this were probably plastic surgeons.

A plastic surgeon was essentially a carpenter. That was because their basic medical technique was to cut off what protruded and to join up what was broken.

When one asked “what kind of doctor are you” and received the reply, “a plastic surgeon,” one could simply sum up that plastic surgeon’s thoughts and personality as that of a carpenter.

The nurses who worked in a cosmetic surgery practice were the same way. Many of the beds in such places were filled with patients who had been injured in industrial accidents, traffic accidents, who were handicapped by physical defects, and other such people.

Most of the patients had fully functional internal organs, and they did not lack for energy or stamina, and they had strength yet in their bodies. That being the case, there was no way these patients could listen to instructions to lie obediently in bed all day long. This greatly frustrated the nurses who had to tend to them.

Of course, the nurses who continued working in a building like this had straightforward personality types, the kind who did not give up easily and who could nonchalantly take in their patients’ son stories. Such a personality was ideal for the job; or rather, if they did not have such a personality, they would have taken another job.

Similarly, the personalities of pediatricians, psychologists, obstetricians, practitioners of internal medicine, emergency doctors, surgeons and other such specialties tended to change to match their areas of expertise the longer they spent there.

This was the effect one’s environment could have on a person.

In that sense, even a short-term stay in a place like the Special Region could

have a great effect on one's personality. More to the point, the subordinates of the character known as Itami Youji had been greatly influenced by him, in both good and bad ways.

Kurokawa Mari, or Kuro-chan to her friends, was one of them.

Kurokawa had seen many people die on the battlefield. She had seen people suffer and struggle desperately to live. She had seen the dangerous regions of the Imperial Capital, where humans of all races had given in to their desires and foolishness, or where they had been toyed with and subjected to incredible suffering by forces beyond their greatest efforts.

It was there that she realized something.

People who arrogantly looked down on things like "Life is lived in one's free time" and "the happy man is the one who wins" would find themselves in for a shock. Perhaps Itami's way of life, which went along the lines of "overworking yourself is pointless," was right.

When she had been worrying about Tuka, Itami's rash methods had been more effective than her own shallow knowledge. That sense of defeat still lingered in her heart.

No matter what, people died when they were killed, and they lived while they were alive. There was no point in being reserved, so one ought to live freely and without a care, because life would always find a way — that lesson had been drilled into her heart.

JSDF Central Hospital

For some reason, Kurokawa stood in this hospital in her white lab coat.

The reason why she, who had been dispatched to the Special Region, was in this place will be touched on later. However, her skills had not faded. Kurokawa immediately made sure of what she had to do, and launched into her work after grasping the essential elements of the situation, just like before. She had turned in an excellent performance, and the nurses who had worked with her back

then had even hoped that Kuro-chan would stay there and work forever. But once Kurokawa began revealing her true nature, the older nurses began worrying about whether they had said the right thing.

When she discovered someone who had been declared NBM (nil by mouth; forbidden food by the doctors) had secretly bought a snack, Kurokawa silently went behind them and mercilessly confiscated the green bean bun they were going to eat before saying:

“You should have been informed that you were going to have a checkup tomorrow, so you’re not allowed to eat. Yet you can’t even hold out for a single night. Are you even worse than a mere beast, perhaps? Is the only thing in that head a limbic system with no cerebral cortex in sight? Or perhaps your blood vessels are narrowed and your frontal lobes aren’t getting enough nutrients. Very well, since you have proven with your own actions that you are inferior to an animal, that you are a being who is unable to rein in his own instincts, then I must reconsider the way I treat you. I shall engrave the expected manner of behavior in this hospital upon your body until it takes the form of a conditioned reflex. Yes, how about tying you down to your bed so you can’t buy food? Oh no, please don’t worry. In order to prevent fluid intake and urination from becoming a problem, I shall give you an IV drip of saline solution. For the sake of hygiene, perhaps I should shave your beard as well. Huh, you don’t like diapers? Well, that makes things difficult. In that case, I shall insert an inflatable catheter through that shrivelled little toy of yours and lodge it in your bladder. While it’s been used to penetrate all this while, now it will be penetrated instead. It will surely be a refreshingly novel experience for you. How about it?”

Her unrelenting verbal barrage would have incapacitated a patient with a weaker heart. The nurses who had rushed over after hearing the disturbance and who had heard Kurokawa’s words all had faces that looked like Munch’s *The Scream*.

That was not the end of Kurokawa’s ferocity.

When servicemen who had been wounded in the Special Region were sent over and they did rude things like squeezing nurse’s buttocks, they would be hit square on the head by a reflex hammer. When said personnel complained, “You hit me! You’re a nurse and you hit your patient!” to her superiors, Kurokawa

would nonchalantly reply, “I was simply performing a reflex examination to see if they would grab their heads with both hands.”

Medical procedures often involved some degree of cutting open the patient with scalpels, penetrating them with needles, striking them and the like. This was a medical invasion of the body and they were permitted in the name of performing treatment. Kurokawa insisted that her actions were of this type.

“I, I’ve never heard of such a reflex examination.”

“Don’t you know? This is known as an octopus reflex, named after the procedure used to determine which of an octopus’ legs function as hands by striking the head. A positive result would indicate the joyous result of the patient having a fully functional sense of nociception.”

“Are, are you kidding?”

“Oh no, I’m deadly serious. If this were the Special Region I would have shot him on the spot. Over here, lewd acts would be referred to the police. This is preferable, no? Fufufufu.”

Since she had been through harsh battlefields in the past, Kurokawa radiated a bone-chilling air around her that made people wonder if she was pissed off.

And so, Kurokawa’s antics dominated the nurses’ conversation.

“Kuro-san was kind of awesome just now, right!?”

“Yeah, she got so worked up. But the department chief didn’t get mad even though she was like that.”

“Still, that can’t be good.”

“Mm, the chief was mad. But she didn’t seem to mind at all.”

“Don’t you think that attitude of hers is fine?”

“You think so too? It feels kind of nice to see her do that too.”

There were many things which upset people during the actual practice of medicine. Kurokawa’s unreserved thoughts and deeds were quite refreshing to many of the ladies and some of the gentlemen.

Alright, now for the reason why Kurokawa — who had been dispatched to the

Special Region — was serving as a nurse in the Central Hospital. This development requires an explanation.

Before coming here, Kurokawa had just returned to Arnus from Kunapnui and had to deal with the influx of new refugees.

The new refugees were not originally from Coda Village. They were people who had lost their homes and family during the Empire's guerilla attacks, who were taking shelter in Arnus.

In many ways, the Coda Villagers no longer qualified as refugees, and so the new refugees were treated differently from them. They now lived in temporary homes on the outskirts of Arnus Town. The former 3rd Recon Team, which had a lot of experience in such matters, put a great deal of effort into this.

And then one day, Kurokawa was summoned by Major Higaki of Recon HQ and ordered to proceed to the JSDF Central Hospital.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"You'll be briefed in detail once you get there," he said, and so Kurokawa accepted her orders, exchanged her battle dress for her nurse's uniform, and headed toward the JSDF Central Hospital.

The person who met her there were the hospital director and the head of nursing.

"Please take a look at this."

What he showed her were a set of medical consultation records. While a lot of it was covered in "MILITARY SECRET" stamps, the address, birthdate, age, chief complaint and many other fields had been left blank.

"This is the reason we called you here."

Kurokawa had noted down the patient's name on its own in the document. One could say it was the only piece of reliable information in it.

"Itami Youji."

"Indeed. This is a patient who is under observation here. But as you can see, it is blank. Could you treat a patient like this, someone about which you knew nothing about except his name?"

“I couldn’t. If my superior asked me to, I’d reply, “Is your brain alright? You should probably go get it checked.”

Kurokawa’s remorseless statement made the director and the nursing head shrink back for a moment, but it was still permissible, and so they continued:

“Neither can we. Still, this is a JSDF medical facility. Even when someone makes a ridiculous request of us like that, we have no choice but to comply.”

“Oh... Is that what you think?”

“Please don’t misunderstand us. We complained too. We said, ‘We can’t work like this’ and ‘Frankly speaking, this is really hard for us’. And then they told us that while they could not disclose information on the patient, they would be sending over someone who was familiar with the patient, so please treat them as an ambassador. And then you came.”

“I see. Indeed, Lieutenant Itami Youji is my superior, and to some extent I am familiar with him. However, being categorized as “someone who is very familiar with his condition” for that reason alone fills me with distaste.”

“Still, it would be better than if we did it. In truth, we have all but given up hope of handling his case. Indeed, it is hard to tell whether he is receiving care or being managed or being watched over. Please help us.”

The two managers bowed their heads.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s because he might have a mysterious parasite from another world in his body, so we received news that he was to be quarantined. Did you understand? It’s an alien parasite!”

Kurokawa looked dubiously at the hospital director, wondering if he was right in the head.

“I’m perfectly fine. No, I think I’m alright, but I’m suspicious myself. That’s because it feels unreal. Even so, as someone who’s been to the Special Region, I’m sure you’ve seen an impossible creature or two over there, right?”

Kurokawa recalled the Special Region Class A Dangerous Beast and nodded.

“Mm, indeed.”

“In that case, mysterious lifeforms shouldn’t be strange to you. Of course, whether it’s actually inside his body remains to be seen.”

While this might have been an order from above, it would seem the director could not keep up with the suddenness of those dictates, and his feelings showed.

It would seem Kurokawa was sympathetic to his plight, because she looked on him in pity.

“In any case, please work hard in this hospital for as long as he stays here. You can do that, right?”

And so, Itami was placed in Kurokawa’s care.

However, there was a problem — on Itami’s side; his attitude towards hospitalization was not a good one.

That said, it could not be helped. That was because Itami did not view himself as a patient. He was in good physical condition was and did not recall being wounded or in pain.

Therefore, he used manga, light novels, and other printed materials to fill up the room assigned to him.

This was somewhat unbearable to the average nurse. That was because to them, a sickbed’s immediate surroundings ought to be kept spick and span.

They put up with him because they sympathized with Itami, who was being quarantined despite not being ill,

However, Itami did not know what they thought. Thus, Itami pulled all sorts of stunts within the range of what was allowed.

As he put it, “I’ve been in the JSDF for 10 years. I might not like it, but I still need to stick to a disciplined lifestyle and exercise my body every day, and I feel uncomfortable if I don’t get to stretch. This must be a government conspiracy too, I’m sure of it.”

However, he had apparently gotten carried away, because one day he suddenly clutched his chest in front of the nurse duty station with a pained look

on his face and groaned, “Abbahhhh, dammit, is it coming!?” and thrashed around.

The nurses broke into a cold sweat. Most of them thought there would actually be some sort of parasite bursting out of his belly. The siren rang, summoning the MPs. who subdued the patient running wildly through the hallways and bumping into things. His linens were in disarray and the hospital was in chaos.

However, that was just a joke of Itami’s and the nurses were furious when they realized that. At the same time, they understood. Itami was a man who did not know self-restraint. After discussing various ways to manage him, they decided to post fully-armed MPs to watch him 24 hours a day, with flamethrower-equipped personnel on standby in case of emergency.

And then Kurokawa ended up having to explain this new treatment to him.

“Yo, Kuro-chan. You look good in white.”

“El-tee. It’s good to see you well.”

“Nothing’s wrong with me, after all.”

“That said, this is still a hospital. Please stay in your room.”

“Ehhh, but it’s so boring. At least let me walk along the hallway.”

“So you can be wrestled down in front of the nurse station?”

“That, that was... in order to live up the mood in the air, it was so gloomy...”

“There’s no need for that in a hospital! Listen here, if you pull a stunt like that again, I’ll sterilize you, el-tee. It’s a bit of a shame, but as a medical professional, I believe that’s the proper way to deal with unknown illnesses and parasites. Disinfection with alcohol is too mild, and using formalin would be too troublesome. Therefore, a flamethrower would be the best solution. They do say fire is the best way to purge microbes, after all. Even those spores which can take high pressure steam cleaning will fall before an incinerator. In other words, “you have to clean dirty things~” While I am personally quite opposed to such methods, you and I are both JSDF personnel with a duty to the people, el-tee. It’s unavoidable for the sake of protecting our citizens from unknown

parasites and aliens. I hope you'll understand the importance of your job in protecting our people from an alien parasite. Do you understand? Has the message been transmitted from your auditory nerves to your brain yet? Has the message reached the depths of your brain yet? OK?"

She held a gigantic enema syringe and pointed its tip at Itami, which sent a chill down his spine. Even Itami had to submit to that.

"Good. El-tee, make sure to consider your position before doing anything."

"Kuro-cha... er, Kurokawa, don't you think you're being a little intense?"

Perhaps he was feeling a little pressured, but Itami's tone was more polite than usual.

"No. If it seems that way, then it must be because of you, el-tee."

"But you weren't like that when we went to Kunapnui..."

Kurokawa probably had an opinion on Itami's words, because she nodded in admission.

"It must be because I haven't worked a shift in a hospital for so long, so I'm a little excited. And I was never too happy to leave the nursing profession, so maybe I'm just a little happy about this."

"What would your parents say if they saw you now..."

Itami imagined Kurokawa's mom would go, "Give me back my daughter! It's your fault that my sweet daughter ended up like this! Give her back to me!" or something.

"The fact is, my mother's passed away already, and my father's a captain on a JMSDF submarine, so he's hardly at home. He's probably going in circles on the seabed now.

This was the first time he had heard of this — Itami's eyes went wide.

"He, he's a navy man!?"

"Yes. The JMSDF that complains about, "we don't have anything to do in the Special Region". The kind who want to ask everyone around 'How is it? I said, how does it feel?' among other things."

“But, but surely the JMSDF gets a lot of the limelight already, right? Like how they’re always ready for a battle in the East China Sea, and they get a lot of light novels written about them like “Silence” and “Downfall”, so there’s no need to go show off in the Special Region, right?”

“That may be true, but I think the amount of involvement is somewhat unbalanced in favor of the land forces. I’ll just dream about Dad commanding a submarine sinking in the waters of the Special Region, then. After all, given the way of the world, such a thing might be possible in the future.”

“Sink - what do you mean sinks, Kurokawa? Can you really say something that terrible so happily?”

“Well, it’s a submarine, so it’s only natural for it to sink.”

“Surely there are better words for that, like submerge or sailing.”

“Indeed. Well, that was an unpleasant way of phrasing it.”

“I’m glad you understand that.”

“Then in turn, you have to be good, el-tee. I know this hospital bores you, el-tee, so I asked Rory and the others to come over.”

“Eh!? Rory and the others?”

Hang on — Itami extended a hand.

“Ah, er, this...”

“You don’t want them around?”

No, no

— Itami shook his head. It was not that he did not like it, which is why he did not say he did not like it.

However, it did not make him happy either. That was because their arrival meant that he would have to abandon the feeling of liberation that came from being separated from the world.

Itami had the feeling that soon, he would be forced to make a decision. At the very least, he wanted to forget that while in this place. But he would not be able to speak the words even if people tried to rip them out from his mouth.

Since Kurokawa was in contact with them, anything he said would soon reach their ears, and he would be in a tight spot.

“No. Thanks for your concern.”

And so, Itami spent his time in his ward obediently as he waited for the pretty girls to visit him.

According to the nurses’ rumors, there was a girl in a goth loli outfit dancing suspiciously, and she was taken in for questioning by the MPs. However, that was permitted as long as she did not bother the nurses.

Today was no different; Kurokawa came to check on him in her capacity as a nurse. Itami called out to her as he paged through a doujinshi.

“I’m so boooored~ I need to exercise~”

“How about some JSDF calisthenics, then?”

“JSDF calisthenics? That sounds lame.”

JSDF calisthenics... they were based on Channel 1 and 2 exercise broadcasts, but multiplied by two or three times. All JSDF personnel had learned them as recruits.

As Itami said, they were quite lame.

“Why is it all the exercises the Japanese can come up with are uncool things that look like they came from Billy’s Bootcamp?”

(TL Note: Exercise program created by Billy Blanks - popular in Japan for a while. Like Tae Bo in America)

Kurokawa replied to Itami’s complaints:

“El-tee, how about using your frontal lobe a little? If you want to do fashionable exercises, then invent them yourself. Maybe the PT instructors will notice and adopt it as the official JSDF exercise of this generation. The servicemen who are sick of the existing routine will loudly proclaim the name of the Itami Exercise to everyone who can hear it. For all you know, they might publish it on three DVDs and make a killing selling them on the home shopping networks. It’ll be famous the world over. People will hold meetings and everyone will be clamoring for you, Chief Itami. Good job.”

Kurokawa gave Itami a big thumbs up.

“Er, even if you say that, I don’t know what I should be doing.”

“When you have problems with an invention, you ought to change your perspective and copy from people who’ve made it. I suggest doing the JSDF exercises to the beat of Billy’s Bootcamp. Now get a move on!”

“Ah, y-yes!?”

Itami sprang off the bed.

“You want me to do... the JSDF calisthenics? Why that, all of a sudden?”

“I’m hoping that you’ll behave once you’re tired out, el-tee. That would save a lot of trouble later on. The night shift nurses will probably be able to say all’s well too. Now then, start running from there!”

Just as Kurokawa said, Itami began performing the JSDF calisthenics to the beat of Billy’s Bootcamp.

His body could not keep up with the rhythm, and his muscles began to cramp.

“Owowowowowow!”

Kurokawa put a hand on her waist and looked down on Itami, who was on his knees.

“Since you’re not used to exercise, you might have torn some of your muscles. When you feel pain, you tense your muscles, and when the tensed portions tear, your pain intensifies and so on, in a vicious cycle. Shall I get an anesthesiologist to help ease the pain? No, that would make it meaningless. Maybe paste cooling plasters on you from head to toe. I’ve always wanted to see what a patient would feel when I applied cooling plasters and heating plasters at the same time. Oh no, don’t worry. The expired plasters in the pharmacy have already been labelled NG stock. We can’t let the country’s resources go to waste, no? If we do this, we won’t have to waste effort on disposing of them, and I’m sure they’ll thank us for it. Peeling off the plasters ought to feel good for you too, el-tee. Do you want to peel them off slowly? Or do you want to do it all in one go?”

“I don’t want either of them!”

Itami shook his head and shrank back onto his bed, but Kurokawa reached a silver packet containing the plasters and loomed close, driving Itami into the room's corner.

"El-tee, this is essential treatment."

"No way! This is over-treatment!"

"What do you mean over-treatment? It's a free service."

"You, you really have changed! You might have been a little sharp-tongued, but what happened to the pure and gentle Kurokawa I once knew!?"

"Ah, no. I've always been like this. I've simply been too polite all this while. But thanks to you, el-tee, I've gone from depressed to cheerful now."

Itami had collapsed to the ground at some point.

The zipper of his hospital gown slowly slid down.

Itami screamed in the hopes of stopping it.

"Noooo, don't! Someone! Anyone! Save me, Mr. Policeman!"

Itami looked at the MP stationed in the corner of his cell for help. However, MP Sergeant A simply smiled coldly and unconcernedly at Itami as he was being stripped.

However, just then, the door flew open with a "Yo! I'm here!"

Itami froze up.

"...What's the meaning of this?"

Beyond the open ward door, the blonde-haired Tuka watched with her eyes wide open. One of Komakado's men leaned over Tuka's shoulder to see what was going on. Then there was Kuribayashi, supporting a bruised Tomita.



Chapter 5

Not even Kurokawa could work her evil on Itami in front of everyone, and so she backed up against the wall.

“Good timing. Great timing, everyone.”

Itami pulled up his half-removed pajama bottoms and welcomed Tuka and the others as though they were goddesses come to rescue him.

This was when Itami noticed Tuka was dressed slightly differently from normal.

“Tuka... what are you wearing? Is it cosplay?”

“Ehehehe~ is it cute?”

Tuka turned a circle in front of Itami.

“Ah, mm, excellent. It’s cute, but it’s also really cool.”

“Of course, I was going to meet you after all, Father... Youji. Had to dress up for it.”

Itami scratched his head and said, “Really now, well, that makes me really happy.”

“Here, for you.”

“Hm? What’s this?”

Looking at it, he saw that Tuka had given him a bag full of clothes for his hospital stay.

Itami did not intend to spend all day sleeping. He was perfectly capable of washing his own clothes, and in fact he had washed his own clothes, but his heart was warmed by the fact that someone was actually concerned enough about him to bring him extra clothing.

“There’s a bento inside too. It’s got all the things you like, Youji...”

Tuka winked.

Itami opened the bento box, which was filled with many kinds of food. It looked like someone had spent a lot of time making. This was what they called charaben, and the core of the design was a heart drawn with ketchup.

It was kind of embarrassing to leave it open for everyone around him to see, so Itami hurriedly closed the lid.

“Thank, thank you very much, Tuka. I’m really happy you made this!”

“Also, give me any dirty clothes you have, I’ll bring them home to wash.”

“Er, sorry to say this but that’s not good, is it?”

“Why are you being so shy at this point? We live together, right? It’s just clothes, let me handle it.”

Tuka had said as much to lay down the facts as a shield under which she could draw closer to him. However, people like Komakado and MP A — who did not know about the relationship between Itami and Tuka and who adhered more closely to the law than most — were startled by it.

In particular, MP A’s expression looked like he was about to say, “You’re laying your hands on another young girl again...” A had been the one who had seen Rory flirting with Itami, and who had summoned his colleagues to arrest Itami for harsh questioning.

His cold, judgmental eyes made Itami feel like he had been stabbed, and he tried to explain:

“Ah, this girl is 165 years old. She’s totally not a high schooler.”

Itami had supplied an answer to a question which had not been asked. Tuka looked at him with a puzzled look on her face, as though to say “what?”

Elves had very long lifespans. They experienced life differently from human beings and they were not bound by age restrictions. Still, she was bothered by why Itami was stating her age like an explanation.

“The truth is, the last time Rory came, Mr. Policeman gave me a really stern talking-to because he thought I was violating the Youth Protection Act or whatnot. While we cleared the misunderstanding up on the spot, I still got an

earful of ‘As a JSDF serviceman, you have to take care of how the world sees you...”

Itami indicated that he had been severely lectured after being mercilessly questioned.

“The Youth Protection... Act?”

Kurokawa answered Tuka’s question.

“In our country, you can be arrested for committing lewd acts with underaged girls. For instance, someone laying hands on someone who looked like Rory would be charged with statutory rape and put on trial.

“What a strange law. Did the person who made it think that young people shouldn’t fall in love?”

“It’s not like that. However, when you’re young, you’re impulsive and easily fooled, no? That’s why the adults made such laws.”

“So instead of moral education to keep people from acting rashly, humans choose to ban those acts instead... how strange. If they don’t gain experience in dealing with such things, they’ll just act impulsively once they’re of age.”

It would seem that in Elven society, they did not place such things beyond the reach of children, but taught them how to control themselves. They nurtured the souls of children with experience, rather than restrictions.

“However, while using age as a limit is strange, limits do have to be placed. It would be very troublesome for the lawmakers to not have a standard for this sort of thing, so in the end they went with age. Such is life.”

Komakado supplied an explanation from his experience as someone connected to law enforcement.

Tuka clapped her hands.

“In any case, it’s fine as long as the girl isn’t underage, right?”

“I guess it’s all right when you put it that way...”

It made sense in theory, so Kurokawa could not help but agree. Still, after seeing Tuka go, “See, it’s fine” and cling to Itami’s arm, Kurokawa felt a little

worried and warned her:

“Even so, please don’t do weird things here. I’ll say this now; this is a hospital.”

“It’s fine, I’ll just be sleeping with Father.”

Those words elicited a powerful reaction from Itami.

“W-wait! What did you just say?”

“I said I’ll be spending the night here... you mean I can’t?”

Tuka put her hands in front of her face and looked up to Itami. Her dewy blue eyes gleamed, and Itami shrank back from her.

“Why - why are you saying that!?”

“Oh yes. It might have been different for hospitals of the past, but modern hospitals don’t let anyone stay overnight with the patients, not even their family members. You’ll cause us a lot of trouble if you insist on doing that.”

Then, the black-suited man with Komakado handed him something from his sleeve, which made him step up with a sharp rap of his walking stick, which seemed to have bent slightly from the force exerted upon it.

“Actually...”

And so, Itami and Kurokawa finally learned of the Ginza disturbance. They turned on the television to learn the details, which was when they realized that the train service in the city had stopped and the banks had shut down.

Much like Komakado had said, there were no reports about the Ginza protesters. There had been foreigners wounded during the Ginza Incident, and while Japan had been compensated by the Empire, that did not include reparations for the foreigners, and so their families could only swallow their grief. The station expressed their sympathy and hoped for a solution.

Itami could not believe that the protesters would turn violent for that point alone. He felt that there was no benefit in coming to Japan and causing that kind of trouble.

“Just believe me!” Komakado shouted.

“You know what happened to Nagano during the Beijing Olympics, right?”

Nagano, a station in the Olympic Torch relay, had been dyed red by Chinese flags.

The Chinese exchange students and workers who came to Japan had systematically shoved the Japanese people aside. People who held Tibetan flags were surrounded by massive Chinese flags and hidden from outside view before being surrounded and beaten up from all sides. Incidentally, all this had been mentioned at the Diet, but for some reason it had never been reported.

“But...”

The protesters shown on TV looked very peaceful and polite. One could hardly believe they had attacked trucks and caused an invasive disturbance.

“Cheh, damn media.”

Komakado and Tomita both clicked their tongues. Kuribayashi took the remote from Itami and switched between various channels to see if anyone was reporting real news, but everything they saw contradicted what they had seen.

“But what Komakado said is true. We were chased around and we thought we would die. We barely managed to make it out of there because Tomita cleared a path for us.”

Tomita was not wearing his bruises for fun. Itami also believed Tuka.

“However, I didn’t think the media would...”

“Still, that was the first time I’ve had such a rough time. I might need to bring a couple of people in for questioning...”

Komakado muttered something about, “If I’m not careful, I might scare them away” and then rose to his feet along with his assistant.

Itami said, “I understand.”

“In other words, Ginza is now very dangerous and we can’t bring Tuka along, so you’re saying she should spend the night here?”

“It seems I got the message across. Good. I still need to do what I was talking about just now, so I have to get back to the office. Finding a place to stay now

would be both difficult and troublesome. The security here should be very good, no?”

Komakado glanced at the MP standing beside Itami’s bed with a shotgun in hand.

MP A saluted in response.

However, Kurokawa calmly indicated her opposition.

“What are you deciding on your own? Do you think you’re shouting love at the heart of the world? Are you operating by Ptolemy’s geocentric earth model? If you’ve mistaken yourself for the center of the world, then I’ll point out the error in your thinking. If you can’t change yourself even after having your mistake pointed out, then we’ll need to perform a CT scan of your head to see if it’s really been stuffed up. If it’s filled up with nonsense, then you must be retarded and we’ll need to fix it with electroshock therapy. If it’s empty, then we’ll fill it with syrup, that ought to fix things. Listen and listen good. Hospitals have rules of their own, and deciding these things on your own will cause me a lot of trouble. If there’s anything I want to say, it would be that you should at least get the director’s permission before talking this nonsense.”

Itami and Komakado were floored by the verbal devastation Kurokawa had unleashed

Kuribayashi’s eyes went wide and said, “Kuro... Kuro-chan, you’ve abandoned your disguise?” while Tuka went “Uwah, you’re awesome, Kurokawa,” and for some reason her cheeks flushed pink.

“What, what should we do now, Itami?”

“You ask me, but I can’t tell you.”

Then, Kuribayashi explained.

“Komakado-san. Kuro is saying you should ask someone in charge for permission.”

“I see. Indeed, that makes a lot of sense. Someone in charge... that means the hospital director, right?”

Kurokawa nodded.

“Yes, he would be good.”

Give me a break — Komakado sighed.



Chapter 6

Kuribayashi Nanami was in Ginza, which was filled with flying rocks and angry shouts. She ducked her head to dodge the water cannons and thrown stones and ducked into the shadow of an abandoned car, shouting “I can’t believe this!” for the nth time today.

She had gone into the chaos of Ginza with her cameraman to look for a scoop, and she was shouting furiously into her mic, but for some reason, this disturbance did not seem to exist on the terrestrial broadcast and satellite news.

“Hey, what’s this!? What’s going on!?”

Nanami barked at a staff member from the news agency through her phone.

However, the reply filled her with despair.

“Apparently the chief handed down an order telling us not to broadcast anything related to Ginza, not to touch it, and not make a stink. We said that we couldn’t just let this be and refused to let go, but...”

“Why the hell does the news exist if we don’t report on things like this when they happen before our eyes!?”

The riot police had their shields braced as they kept the rioters from spilling over their containment lines. The rioters saw this and they became cocky, pelting Ginza with rocks and firebombs.

“So everything I’ve done it pointless!? Then I’m going back!”

“It’s not like that, just take as much footage as you can. Even if we don’t release it now, we’ll air it sooner or later!”

“What’s the point if we don’t report this now!?”

Nanami jammed her phone back into her pocket, and at the same time she recalled Komurasaki’s words.

The news had never conveyed the whole of the truth in their broadcasts.

After all, the act of reporting was to package and reformat the facts.

The thing called news was something that was edited for someone's benefit. That said, it was something which was only done when necessary, because they only had a limited time to finish their newscasts. But now, this editing mechanism was being used for another purpose. More to the point, it was being used to delete news that was harmful to certain people.

Nanami turned to the pressman hiding behind a car with her, a familiar face from a different company.

"What's the duty of a reporter!?"

"What do you mean, Nanami? Why are you asking that question now!?"

Komurasaki answered.

He was one of the media personnel who had rushed over after hearing about the Ginza disturbance.

"We might not be able to use the footage we've worked so hard to collect. Komurasaki, doesn't that make you depressed?"

"I'm used to this sort of thing. If you want the pictures you take to be used, then just read the mood and take them!"

"But this is wrong!"

Nanami used the sound of her gritted teeth to hold back the unhappiness welling up within her.

"Oi, ah, film the foreigner being dragged away by that riot cop."

Komurasaki told the cameraman to record a riot police officer taking a rioter away. Perhaps the riot cop was angry, because he was a little rough on the captive. This image was perfect for making viewers think that the police were using excessive force and of police brutality.

"Guh, then I'll... Sunagawa-kun, film that."

Nanami shouted, directing the cameraman to film an isolated riot cop being gang-beaten by a group of foreign rioters. If this was reported, it would leave an impression of the riot's savagery in the audience's hearts. In that way, people

would think that it was natural for the riot police to step up and quell the violence.

“Alright, we’ll go get opinions from the foreigners in the Ginza Garrison.”

Komurasaki stood up in order to look for a more docile-seeming Caucasian man sitting on the ground, while Nanami went in the opposite direction.

“Let’s interview the tourists and shoppers who got wrapped up in this.”

To that, the cameraman replied:

“Nanami, that’s no good. None of that footage will be usable!”

“I believe that the media has an obligation to fulfil. There ought to be rules on what one reports! Since we know that we’re using public airwaves, we shouldn’t think that we can do anything for the sake of work, just to make a quick buck!”

However, Sunagawa the cameraman cooled Nanami back down.

“Nanami, your dislike for Komurasaki is making you biased! If you want to report the truth, then you need to cover both sides evenly!”

“Ah...”

Nanami felt like she had been punched in the head.

After leaving the Prime Minister’s residence, Kanou rejected the car that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had sent over for him and said, “Natsume, a word with you, please,” before boarding the car of the Minister of Defense.

“What’s wrong? Not going back to Foreign Affairs?”

Natsume had a stiff look on his face, and his tone sounded like he was trying to chase Kanou away. However, Kanou simply moved behind Natsume and took a seat on the side.

“I have to hand it to them.”

“Well, don’t just hand it to them. What are we going to do next?”

“I didn’t expect Morita to be so cowardly.”

Unable to bear the pressure of his duties, Morita had begun talking about handing the management of the Gate over to the UNSC.

Of course, the Cabinet had united to stop him. Defense Minister Natsume was particularly forceful in his opposition.

“What’ll happen to our country’s well-being if the UNSC gains control of the Gate?”

“Well, we’ll at least get something out of it. And if the UNSC takes over, we won’t have to worry about what happens after that, so that’s a small plus.”

“Even if we wash our hands of the Special Region’s problems this way, what about the problems with China? Do you think China will just back down like that? Once they’ve seen how timid we are, they’ll probably send naval vessels to the Senkaku Islands or capture fishing boats, or worse, they might actually send men ashore! Do you think that’s a good thing!?”

“As if. But if we take direct action here, what about the Japanese businessmen being held hostage? They’ll say we left them to die. Our approval ratings have been low already; if we do that, we’ll be finished. We’ll be slaughtered at the polls.”

“Pull yourself together, Prime Minister! If that happens, then just condemn them for taking our people hostage! Why the hell do you have to go along with them!”

“Then how about the rare earth custom clearance procedures? All the companies are crying to us about the inflating yen. It’s the same with the Senkaku Islands, if a war breaks out, there’ll be a lot of casualties. It’s okay if we win, but what if we lose!?”

“Certainly, we might lose a lot of lives if there’s fighting. However, we need to let them know that they will pay a bloody price for every inch of soil they take from us. If not, how will Japan maintain her independence and dignity in the future? You could stand to learn from Finland in World War 2. The Soviets thought they could conquer them easily and attacked, but instead they lost

millions of people. The Soviets won, but they knew not to look down on Finland. Therefore, that country never went through what the Baltic States did, and remained independent.”

“You may say that, but I can’t make such a decision.”

“The international community is just like grade school and middle school. Got it? The teachers as represented by the UN are incompetent idealists. Therefore, the classroom is ruled by power and numbers. What do you think happens to a kid who’s looked down on by others in a place like that? They’ll be bullied and taken advantage of by everyone around them and become a laughingstock as well. Nobody will help them either. If you don’t want to be bullied, then you have to bite anyone who sticks their hand out at you and make them think that messing with you is more trouble than it’s worth. A nation can’t get by with love and closeness alone. You need to instil fear into their hearts for the sake of the people and the nation’s interests!”

However — Morita adjusted his crooked glasses and hmphed by way of response.

“I dislike such violent solutions, Bullying and the like can be resolved by discussion.”

“Spoken like a useless teacher with no personal experience of such matters. Do you think your preferences can defend the nation!?”

“We’ll need to ask for America’s help after all. We’ll turn the problem of the Gate and the administration of the Special Region to the UNSC. Similarly, we’ll ask them to make China back off. If we can include the Senkaku islands as a peacekeeping treaty item, they’ll surely be able to keep China in check.”

“Please don’t. Please, do not do this. Where can you find a nation that will help a country without the will to protect itself!?”

“Defense Minister Natsume. This is my opinion as Prime Minister. If you are opposed to it, then I must let you go. Is that acceptable?”

“Prime Minister, don’t be so hasty.”

While Natsume was still trying to persuade him, Morita had already solidified his position.

“I know about myself! This is a decision made after calmly considering Japan’s situation!”

After that, Kanou spoke up:

“Prime Minister Morita, I hope you will wait a little longer. Please consider that a last resort; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will also try to see if there’s something we can do. Therefore...”

“I understand. Yes, let’s wait until tomorrow, then. However, if there’s no solution, I’ll proceed with the course of action I outlined just now. Is that acceptable? That will be the decision of this Cabinet.”

Morita glared at Natsume as he added, “Got it?”

As the minister’s car left Nagata-cho behind, Natsume looked up towards a lighted window and sighed. Perhaps man was a creature which surpassed anger only to find hollow depression beyond it.

“Why did a man like that become our Prime Minister?”

“Well, in our nation, the people who finish their work without making waves are looked upon favorably by the bosses and are promoted to a high position, And the position of party leader is filled after considering everyone’s gains and drawbacks. That leaves people who want to settle problems amicably and duck responsibility. So the only people they can draw on aren’t suitable to be leaders.”

“Do you consider me a violent man?”

“I don’t think so. While one might think Morita’s solution places safety and the preservation of human life first, the result will make many more people suffer. If we showed right now that we are willing to shed blood to protect ourselves, we’d end up losing less people instead. In this world, it’s the half-baked and the peace-lovers who cause most of the tragedies, ironically enough. Even when the Nazis were overrunning Europe, the US and the UK simply sat

back and watched. As a result, the war grew bigger and more people were killed. If they had stopped Hitler earlier, fewer lives would have been lost.”

“I think so too. Although, I also feel that saying ‘if we did X, then it would have been Y’ is a very dangerous way of thinking.”

“And now, our problem is China.”

“Mm. China’s already begun to challenge us with ‘unrestricted warfare’.”

“What’s that?”

It would seem this was the first time Kanou had heard of such a thing, and he requested an explanation.

“It’s a new conceptualization of warfare put forward by two colonels in the PLA, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, which states that every aspect of society should become a battlefield. According to them, war is not waged purely through military means, but by expanding the theater of battle to encompass every aspect of life. For instance, mounting media offensives, conducting economic warfare through currency speculation, monopolizing resources, making the enemy doubt the rightness of their actions through psychological warfare, computer virus attacks...”

“I see... very well done. However, can you really divide all these systems up and then wage war on them? You’d need to build your strategy on an assumption of coordinated action and then employ the various strategies that you’d need.”

“Yes. Also, since it’s based on Mao Zedong’s thinking, where one fights using the resources and weapons of the enemy, as the defenders we are forced to fight our comrades, who have been used by the enemy. We need to solve the problem where we’re forced to fight a war of attrition against our own people.”

“I have to hand it to them.”

Kanou looked to the air and sighed.

“Handing the Special Region to the UNSC is part of their plan, I’m sure. They’re trying to weaken us on multiple levels.”

“But Morita doesn’t understand that. He’s already decided to give up.”

Both Natsume and Kanou fell silent.

They looked out at the night-time scenery, and then Natsume quietly said:

“Kanou, do you think Miss Lelei is still in the Special Region?”

“Yes. I’ve got no basis for that, but in manga terms, it would be something like, ‘that’s what my soul (ghost) is whispering to me’.”

Saying so, Kanou pointed at his head with a confident look on his face.

“You recommended me that manga, didn’t you, Kanou? I read it. It was by Shirow Masamune, right?”

“Yes.”

Perhaps he was embarrassed because someone else knew the origin of that line, but Kanou ducked his head like a child whose pranks had been discovered.

“Kanou-san. I can’t help you if you tell the Cabinet that sort of thing. Regretfully, I have no cards to play at times like these. But you’re not the same, are you?”

“Me? What cards would I have to play? I’m an upright politician, you know. Do you want me to take out an ad for a giant tractor or something?”

“No, no, not that far. Even if you don’t hire a legendary assassins, I’m sure you know someone who can handle the weighty task of making contact with the Special Region Expeditionary Force and rescuing Lelei-san — a personal friend, in fact.”

“If you’re talking about him, wouldn’t he fall under your purview, Minister of Defense? You can use the SFGp, right?”

“But the Prime Minister would find out. He might be an airhead, but I’m pretty sure he’s got an eye on my movements.”

Kanou went “tch” and acknowledged the truth of Natsume’s words.

“You’re probably right that he’d be willing to do it. And we can guarantee his safety as a bargaining chip. Alright, I understand. I’ll try and talk him into it. At the same time, you have to help me with the cleanup. At least go through the formalities of preparing so he won’t have a hard time after he’s done. It would

be too much to push the responsibilities we have to bear onto him as well.”

“What should I do?”

“Start by writing an order to the Special Region Expeditionary Force. Put your chop as the Minister of Defense on it. It’s nothing much, it won’t defy the Cabinet’s will, so don’t worry. After all, Morita says he’s handing it over to the UNSC tomorrow, so going our own way until then should be fine.”

Kanou handed Natsume a piece of paper.

Natsume received the paper, then took out a fountain pen and began contemplating the paper’s contents.

“Just write ‘I permit you to do anything you can think of which is necessary to safeguard our nation’s interests’, that should do.”

“But what happens after that?”

“All will be well as long as we can topple Morita from the Prime Minister’s chair by tomorrow morning. Tonight, I’ll persuade the entire Cabinet to tender their resignations. Surely Morita won’t be able to handle all the ministerial positions at once. We’ll use that to force him to quit.”

It had been stated so succinctly that Natsume took several seconds to understand the meaning within those words.

If they ousted the Prime Minister at a time like this, he would be replaced by an interim leader. There was no good in becoming Prime Minister at a time like this.

“Wait, hang on a bit, the elections aren’t long off; are you planning to become the Prime Minister?”

Natsume’s face hardened, like he had witnessed a friend expressing his desire to kill himself.

“Better than letting him

do it. If being chosen to lead the Cabinet is necessary for Japan to survive, then I’ll put all my effort into it. Isn’t that what it means to be a politician?”

“But think of all the hard work you’ve put in until now! Your political life will

be over!”

“The men in uniform have already put their lives on the line. We need to match them in order to be fair. Personally, I don’t think a political career is worth as much as a human life.”

Kanou declared: “This is our battle, as politicians. I’m going all-in, Natsume,” and his eyes sparkled.

Zorzal’s Imperial Army had been fighting with the legitimate government’s army for half a day now, but both forces were still stalemated.

Shortly after the sun set, it became a night battle fought by the light of torches and the moon.

Since there was no decisive advantage to exploit on either side, both armies simply smashed into each other over and over again.

They pulled back their tired and wounded men, then committed fresh troops into the fray. They patiently continued this battle of attrition.

However, this was nothing but a dilemma for Pina’s outnumbered forces.

“Battlegroup Dozzel can’t hold on any longer!”

“Battlegroup Mason’s requesting a temporary withdrawal!”

The messenger horses brought these mournful notifications whenever they arrived

Pina desperately thought of how to keep the fraying lines from collapsing.

However, the faster the damage spread, the more difficult it would be to commit the reserves into the battle. That would make the troops at the frontline fatigue faster and which would result in them being crushed by emboldened enemy, which would further increase the damage to their lines, in a vicious cycle.

“Motherfucker!”

The command staff girls were bandaging Beefeater's arms by torchlight. Perhaps Beefeater's crude curse came from the fact that she could no longer bear to see Pina holding back her anger, and the girls tending to her wrinkled their brows.

"Beefeater-sama, that's not very refined."

"I know, I know, assuming I survive this battle, I'll pay more attention to my conduct."

She might be doing a man's job, but people would doubt her character if she imitated a man's crudities as well, the girls admonished. However, it was also a fact that such an outburst suited her nature surprisingly well.

"Bozes! I'm heading out again! That ought to improve things, so go consolidate our people in the meantime and send them out once more."

Beefeater pulled out the lance she had stuck into the ground, then flicked it through the air to clear the dirt from its tip.

"Wait. This is your sixth time already!"

"Doesn't matter if it's my seventh or eighth time, if I can fight, then I have to fight. After all, I want to complain to my man, 'I fought so hard, what took you so long?'"

Covered in battle damage, Beefeater turned back to regard her subordinate knights.

"Seems like nobody's saying no even now."

None of them were hurt. All of them nodded at their commander's words. That was because they were all experienced warriors.

"Toy soldiers that you put on a shelf are worthless. I like the look on your faces, it puts me at ease. Let's pep the men up! Show them that they'd better fight like hell if they want the girls to fall for them! Same goes for you lot, if you see a good man, don't hesitate and take him for your own! After all, it'll be too late for that once you're dead! Scattering the petals of love is a woman's way of doing things, isn't it!?"

With that, Beefeater spurred her horse on with a cry of "Then let's go!" and

charged out in a flash.

The banner of the White Rose gleamed, and everyone watched as she faded into the night. Perhaps she had thought of something as she saw Beefeater leave, but Bozes turned around as well.

“I’m going too.”

“Bozes-sama! Your body—”

The attendants moved up as one to stop her, but Bozes shook her head.

“How can I tell my unborn child that I was waiting in the rear while everyone was fighting because I was worried about my body? The baby that Tomita and I made won’t be harmed by this much! ”

Bathed in Bozes’ majestic gaze, the command staff girls shrank away from her.

“Now then, the knights of the Yellow Rose will be sallying forth as well. With me!”

Even Bozes’ unit had deployed. They raised their swords as they charged into the chaotic battlefield.

The flowers around Pina were slowly dwindling in number.

Amidst this desolate sight, all Pina could do was array the Red Rose Knights behind her as she stared out at the battlefield.

“Hamilton!”

Hamilton stood up in her saddle, her hands firmly grasping her reins, and she looked into the distance. However, there was nothing to be seen in the darkness of the night even if she squinted into the distance.

“They’re not here yet.”

“No! Don’t look into the distance, you should be looking straight ahead.”

Upon hearing that, Hamilton thudded down onto her saddle like the strength had left her body.

The horse took the force of her sudden impact. Hamilton gently caressed her horse’s face and whispered, “sorry I scared you” before tugging on her reins to

bring her next to Pina.

“Hamilton... switch out with the second line troops so they can rest and eat. Tell them to stay in formation as they consume their rations.”

“Yes!”

The messenger rider shouted, “Odd-numbered units are to rest! Lying down is permitted! Rations to be distributed forthwith!” as he rode from the frontline.

The soldiers on his side were seated in scattered clumps, several hundred meters behind the place where their comrades were bleeding and dying. After that, they were issued water and food, and the men stood, sat or lay down as they ate and drank, filling their bellies for the fighting to come.

“I have to hand it to Pina-denka. She’s a tough nut to crack. I didn’t expect her to fight this hard...”

As Zorzal’s commander, General Helm felt that Pina’s formation was very solid. He was not so much awed as speechless. He admitted that Pina was not simply a princess and the founder of a knight order, but a formidable foe that he ought to have accorded the appropriate respect.

Helm had taken various measures to shake the opposition.

He had led the charge with those demihumans that had ferocious pushing power to punch small holes in the battle line, then pretended to send his main forces into the gap to make his foe waver, and he had also conducted fake retreats to cause havoc in the enemy formation.

Even so, Pina’s defenses were still sturdy and immovable, perhaps even a little sluggish.

He saw how Dozzel and Mason’s units were pulling back and had concluded that this was the time to strike a decisive blow. Thus, he sounded a charge at the enemy’s headquarters, only to have his offensive crushed and scattered by a pincer maneuver from Beefeater’s and Bozes’ knights. He could not help but sigh about how he had let his people down.

In order to lighten the mood, Karasta said:

“Rather than be saddened for your men, you ought to praise her Highness for anticipating this development and smartly defeating it. To think she would even send out Bozes, her right-hand woman.”

It’s hard to believe she’s an Imperial Princess who spent all her time in the palace,

Helm’s staff officers mused.

“What on earth happened to her Highness that made her grow like this?”

Naturally, it was the difficulties she had encountered which had made her grow. But to Helm and the others, who did not know what Pina had been through, it seemed as though Pina had become a different person overnight.

“We’ve had a hard time all this while. Nobody can match us in combat experience!”

“We have the advantage in numbers too. No need for petty tricks; if we keep fighting like this, we’re sure to win.”

Just as Mutra and Karasta had said, Pina’s losses would accumulate over time, and if they continued fighting, her fighting strength would reach zero first. That was why they had the luxury of complementing Pina’s growth.

However, Zorzal could not calm down after listening to the three generals’ words. He bit his nails and said:

“We’ll be in trouble if we’re too optimistic. After all, time is our enemy.”

The three generals bowed courteously to Zorzal, indicating that he need not worry.

“The reason why Pina-denka chose a disadvantageous field battle is plainly evident. She wants to use herself as bait to keep us here before reinforcements arrive.”

“As long as you know. This precious time was bought with the lives of our men, so don’t waste it. Same goes for you... Bouro.”

From where he was crouching in the shadows, Bouro said, “I’ve gathered the

full strength of the Haryo for this attack. We shall soon be able to give you good news, your Highness,” as he scraped his head across the ground.

Within Formal Manor, the battle maids were each having a hard time fighting against the enemy.

That was because their opponents’ numbers far exceeded the usual for such stealth operations.

Persia and the seven sentries with her were set over the main gate of the manor, and they were startled by the number of enemies that had showed up.

「喵？二十人！？」

If that was the full force the enemy had sent over, and if the battle would end once they were finished off, then there would be no problem. However, over five alarm whistles came from various parts of the manor, which showed that what they could see was only part of the enemy force.

If there were similar numbers in all those other locations, that would mean there were over 100 enemies attacking them.

“Well, that’s the Empire for you. To think they had so many spies...”

Mamina had to honestly congratulate the amount of force the enemy could bring to bear.

Although House Formal’s fortunes had risen recently, they did not have more than 50 battle maids who could fight like this.

Of course, the portions of the Count’s estate that had been allocated to the demihumans contained enough trained youths and reserve fighting strength to number a hundred people. However, that was the full manpower they could muster without consideration for sustainable fighting.

It would be committing the instructors and the students from the fighting academies into the fray, in addition to their mainline combat units. Once they were lost, they would not be able to replenish their fighting strength for a long time.

And of course, Zorzal had sent over a hundred people over.

The shadow battles they had fought until now had caused quite a lot of damage, and now they were being fought on such a large scale. The Haryo who fought Zorzal's covert actions for him were a mysterious organization; perhaps they were a bigger group than expected.

Since the enemy had an overwhelming advantage in numbers, they would have to sell their lives dearly. Even if they could not hold out against the foe, they had to reduce the enemy numbers by as much as they could. The first part of that was turning this into a melee.

"Mamina!"

"Got it. Two for one, the usual allocation. So the three of us need to take out six of them, am I right?"

And in turn, they would probably all be killed. That was a very likely outcome.

"Kurata, sorry ~nya."

She apologized to the man she had started seeing recently, who she would never see again.

If she had known things would be like this, then she ought to have started dating him much much much sooner and had a good time with him. She had thought that human males would never court a Catperson in earnest — perhaps that timidity of hers had been a mistake.

The battle began.

Soon, both sides pressed close to each other, and countless throwing knives filled the air. They evaded the thrown blades and slashed at each other with daggers once they met the opposition.

Keen claws ran over her body, shredding her maid uniform and baring her flesh, but in exchange, she brought down an enemy. She turned to take on a second foe, but Persia saw her opponents slinking into the manor depths like they were fleeing battle.

The spear-armed sentry seemed to be having trouble dealing with just one of the enemy, and the others slipped past him.

“Nya!?”

The enemy had no intention of fighting. Instead, they rushed single-mindedly into the manor.

Persia whistled for help and handed the manor front to the sentries before she began tracking them. Eventually, the battle maids positioned within the manor house heard the whistling and ran over.

“Tracker squad with me ~nya! The rest of you tighten up the defense on the main door ~nya!”

Persia hunted down the gradually dwindling enemy numbers. There were only two young fighters left among the enemy. Surely they did not think that two people would be enough to defeat Persia and the others. In that case, they must be trying to delay them.

“This is bad ~nya.”

From what Persia and the others could see, the two people left to block them were two young female Beastmen.

They were probably 14 or 15? Were they canine or feline? It was hard to tell what race they were given their mixed heritage. They ran at Persia and the others with no regard for their own lives.

They attacked without reserve, as though what happened to them was not an issue.

“You idiots ~nya!”

Their blade skills were unrefined, and their blows lacked force. They were bold, which put the surrounding maids on the back foot, but someone like Persia could see through her enemies’ movements. She casually evaded the points of their weapons, hacked off their weapon arms, and stabbed their vitals with her own blade.

Even so, the young Beastwomen still came at Persia. Even if they could not beat her, they wanted to slow Persia down.

Persia shoved them aside, and this time they latched onto the hem of her maid uniform and refused to let go. They died with their teeth sunk into Persia's clothes.

"Cheh."

Persia clicked her tongue at the unexpected delay and pulled out her dirk.

She tore off the enemy, then cut off the large swathes of fabric that could no longer serve as clothing and cast it aside.

Persia set off against the enemy once more, the pads of her feline carnivore's feet showing as she ran after the opposition.

However, Mamina called out a warning from where she was running behind Persia.

"Uwaaaahhh, Persia, that's lewd, that's really lewd!"

The contents of Persia's skirt were practically exposed as she ran.

Persia wore a pair of lace stockings on her legs, as well as several dagger sheathes that were usually not visible. And of course, one could not leave out the almost fully-exposed area around the base of her slender tail.

"It, it can't be helped ~nya!"

Embarrassed, Persia hurriedly pressed down the region of her skirt near her butt. As a result, that slightly slowed down her pursuit of the enemy.

However, Mamina spoke again:

"You'll never hear the end of it if the Head Maid sees this."

The Head Maid was the sort of person who would go "how unsightly" when she saw someone wiping their sweat. If she saw how Persia was dressed, she would probably nag Persia for a couple of days or more.

Even more embarrassed now, Persia pulled down the hem of her skirt more forcefully. But the cut-up fabric would not extend.

"Uuu..."

Perhaps she felt sorry Persia, but Mamina said:

“S-still, I think Kurata would be very happy to see this.”

Mamina mentioned the name of the human male that Persia had started seeing recently.

But Persia replied, “He won’t ~nya.”

Persia’s feline instincts told her that Kurata liked modest girls. After all, Kurata had approached Persia because he was enthralled by her long-skirted maid’s outfit.

“If he sees me like this, he’ll dislike me ~nya.”

As she realized this, Persia’s footsteps grew slower and slower.

And so, this was how the enemy managed to use young foes to delay the opposition.

After Komakado contacted the hospital director and received permission from him, as well as Kurokawa, Tuka and the others were allowed to spend the night in Itami’s room. That said, Tuka and Itami sharing a bed was immoral and would never be allowed, so the bed was given to Tuka and Kuribayashi, while Itami and Tomita had to make do with mattresses from the storage shed.

“Ehhhhhh! Do I have to sleep on the el-tee’s bed...”

However, Kuribayashi was not happy with the bed, and so she complained.

Most ladies were quite sensitive to sleeping on a bed that a man had used before. Of course, the linens and mattress were clean; she was simply complaining in an exaggerated way about its previous occupant.

Although everyone else felt that Kuribayashi had nerves of steel, they all felt that she was being oversensitive.

“You don’t have a problem sleeping on the ground, what a weirdo.”

As she heard Itami sneak a dig in at her, Kuribayashi grumbled like an upset cat.

“I feel a different way compared to when we’re sleeping in the field!”

However, Kurokawa had an indignant look on her face as she addressed Kuribayashi.

“What kind of decadence is this? Are you saying you want Tuka to sleep with the el-tee while you sleep with Tomita? Hospitals aren’t hostels you visit with your friends and neither are they hotels! I’ll give you a change of clothes, so make do.”

“Okay~”

As Kurokawa complained, she changed the bedsheets. In an instant, the bed was neatly made, its corners as sharp as a ream of PPC copy paper.

Kuribayashi had already changed the pillowcase and hugged it to her massive chest. Tuka looked forward to the end of Kurokawa’s labors.

In the end, Kurokawa finished, so all that was left was to put down the pillow. Just then, Tuka cheered “Woohoo! I’m first!” and suddenly burrowed under the covers.

There was some fumbling under the sheets, and then her stockings and underwear and blouse flew out one after the other.

Kuribayashi backed away at this sudden development, but once she realized what was going on, she scolded Tuka:

“Wait, wait a minute, Tuka! What are you doing!?”

“Getting ready to sleep, of course!”

Only Tuka’s face was showing from under the covers, and she had a placid, bemused expression on her face as she replied. The lines of her neck and shoulders peeked out from under the covers, gleaming as though she had just been born.

“But, butbutbutbutbut, but! Why do you have to strip naked!?”

“Because I’m going to sleep, of course, isn’t that obvious!?”

Kuribayashi gathered up the clothing and underclothing which Tuka had tossed out so the men would not see.

“What, what, what do you mean by obvious!? It’s not obvious at all!”

However it would seem the elf maiden truly did not fathom the reason for that. She had a puzzled look on her face as she said, “But clearly you’d take off your clothes when you can sleep under covers.”

“I do that all the time... is something the matter?”

“The el-tee and Tomita and the MP are all here! You’re being too careless!”

Tuka tilted her head and asked, “What’s wrong with that?”

She did not seem to fathom why Kuribayashi was so worked up. Moreover, as she saw Kuribayashi about to go to bed without changing, she muttered, “it’s not like this is a nap, how weird.”

“Let’s leave that aside for now and go to sleep. I’m tired from being chased all day.”

Tuka grabbed Kuribayashi’s hand and pulled her into the bed.

“Hold, hold on, Tuka! ...Hang on a bit, eh, don’t tell me my virginity’s in danger!?”

“What are you saying? How could that subject come up when it’s just girls sharing a bed?”

“That’s because your hand — ah, Tuka, don’t touch there!”

“Ohhhhhh, your boobs are huge, Shino! They’re too big for one hand and really bouncy!”

As the two of them kicked up a fuss, Tomita could not hide the look of vexation on his face.

“El, el-tee... what are the two of them doing?”

“Don’t imagine it. You won’t be able to sleep if you get turned on.”

“Still, shouldn’t we stop them?”

“It’ll be fine. It’s not as though anything will happen if we leave them. They’ll cool off by themselves. Tuka falls asleep easily.”

Just as Itami said, after Kuribayashi abandoned her resistance, the noisy bed

immediately quieted down. That was because the Elf maiden had lain down and gone to sleep in short order.

“She, she really fell asleep.”

If one listened closely, one could even hear the sound of her breathing.

“Alright, let’s turn in.”

Itami pulled the covers over himself as well.

Kurokawa administered an icepack to Tomita’s bruises, and then said:

“Everyone, please behave. If I hear any commotion, I’ll sew your mouths up. I’ll also sew your eyelids shut so you can dream more easily. Anyone interested?”

“Eh, no, no need for that. Don’t worry about it.”

“Then please keep yourselves quiet. I want a silent night. I hope to be able to inform the morning shift of the peaceful night we had. If anyone disturbs me, well, that’ll be the cause for something interesting. Ah yes, how about 18G syringe therapy? I’m sure it’ll work wonders on shoulder pains, backaches, nerve pains and various other symptoms.”

Kurokawa gestured with her hands to show them the size of an 18G syringe. After verifying the look of fear in Itami and Tomita’s eyes, she strode away, her nurse’s shoes making noise as she walked over the vinyl flooring.

After that, the silence was like the kind one would find in the wake of a patrolling teacher during a class trip. There was the sound of clothes rustling and someone turning over in the dim room.

Kuribayashi’s whimper broke the silence.

“El-tee, Tuka...”

“She’s playful, right? It’s not just the rumors which say she’ll go after both men and women, she even said so from her own mouth. Well, that’s how it is. You’re just going to be her pillow, so don’t worry.”

“Alright. Please tell Kuro-chan she was just treating me as her bolster and not to worry. Still, how did you know all this, el-tee?”

“...Eh, there’s reasons for it.”

“Now that you mention it, you were sleeping with Tuka all that time she wasn’t right in the head. That’s how you knew about Tuka using people as hug pillows. And you’re not surprised by her habit of sleeping in the nude... don’t tell me...”

“It, it, it couldn’t be helped!”

“El-tee, don’t tell me... the two of you did it?”

“How could we? She was treating me as her father, how could I live with myself if our relationship ended up that way!”

“Really? At that time, you would have given in if Tuka had been more forceful, right? I have to hand it to you, being able to endure having a completely naked Tuka hugging you. You know, when I’m this close to her, Tuka really does look super pretty. Her skin’s smooth, without any bags or folds, her hair is sleek and shiny, and anyone would envy her proportions. And they all came together in a perfect combination... do you know what it was like for me just now? Tuka wasn’t just hugging me tightly, but she even locked her legs around me...”

So I couldn’t even turn over, Kuribayashi muttered.

“It was the same for me back then.”

“As I thought.”

After that, Tomita — who had been listening quietly to the exchange all this time — asked a question.

“Could you please tell me the secret of how you could bear with it in a situation like that...”

While hardly anyone abided by it any more, the personnel of the Special Region Expeditionary Force had still been ordered not to fraternize with the females of the Special Region. Tomita was the first to violate that order. One could say that Tomita represented all the men who would not be able to endure it.

Itami puffed himself up and replied:

“Well now. The desire to live up to the other person’s trust makes your will

strong. While it is difficult to hold out until morning, if you succeed in doing so, you'll gain self-confidence."

"You say that, but surely you did something right, el-tee?"

"No, not at all."

Things being what they were now, Itami felt that the situation back then had been handled well.

If he had done anything weird, it would have driven a wedge between himself and Tuka, and they would not have been able to maintain the trust between each other.

"While I think that's worthy of praise, I can't help but worry myself, El-tee, are you not interested in the female body?"

He's an otaku after all, only 2D women turn him on, Kuribayashi jabbed.

"Let me put this out there first, I may be a divorcee, but I had a wife once! Plus, I'm actually experienced (combat-proven). I'm not a man who's all talk."

"What do you mean experienced? I'd laugh if your wife left you because you made her do all sorts of cosplay."

"Hell no!"

"Then why didn't you do anything to Tuka?"

"I feel that if both parties are in the mood, they'll do stuff like that. But back then, Tuka wasn't holding me because she was in the mood. It was a bit like how the man she loved didn't like her, so she clung to another man out of loneliness. She wasn't even asking for anything in exchange. That's when I knew I couldn't touch her. For all I knew, Tuka might have had a memory of 'doing it with her dad' or something."

After that, Kuribayashi turned to face Itami.

"Isn't it uncomfortable to have Tuka hug you in the nude? Don't you think she's very feminine?"

"How rude! She was super hot today and really feminine! I've been turned on

ever since I saw her face!”

“Why, why are you saying perverted things like that so proudly!?”

“She’d be more moe if she wore lewder clothing like in cosplay.”

Tomita butted in halfway, and Itami replied that she was cute enough in daily life.

Kuribayashi summed up by saying she did not want to hear about such lewd topics any more.

“In any case! Please tell Tuka that sort of thing to her face. After all, she’s going to worry when she comes at you completely naked and you have those weird thoughts in your head.”

“She’s going to be worried?”

“Won’t she!? Of course she’s going to wonder why the man she likes doesn’t do anything to her when she bares herself to him. She’ll think, ‘why is this happening, what’s going on, am I not charming enough, don’t tell me he’s not interested in this sort of thing’, that’s how a girl’s heart works.”

“There’s no need to worry about that.”

“Girls pay a lot of attention to where men are looking, and whether or not they’re treated as girls...”

“I see.”

“In any case, please look at Tuka. It’s probably not be the same as before, but right now, Tuka’s very serious about you, el-tee.”

As Itami thought, why is Kuribayashi saying all this, he replied, “Yes, yes” over and over again.

However, the conversation did not end there... his cell phone vibrated.

Kuribayashi and Tomita quietly sat up and checked their phones. After verifying that it was not for them, they looked at Itami.

“Eh? Mine?”

“Probably.”

“Ah, is that it... who could it be, seriously...”

He could not reach it from where he was lying on the ground, so Itami rose with an unhappy look on his face to take the phone from the headboards of his bed. However, when he saw the LCD display show the words “His Excellency Taro”, he went “Eh” and nearly fumbled the phone. Then he accepted the call and placed the phone to his ear.

“Hello, this is Itami. What’s up, why are you calling at a time like this? Mm, I was sleeping. But I’ve had enough sleep for a lifetime, so I’m fine. Mm. Uh, eh!? Can you say that again!? Eh, how could that be, are you kidding me? S-seriously? But how did that happen!? Understood. In any case, I’ll do it as fast as possible. Okay, okay.”

Itami stared at the phone for a while. Perhaps the call had ended.

After that, he pressed a few keys on the phone and brought it back up to his ear.

“Lieutenant Itami. Using phones in the ward is...”

Itami gestured to MP A to wait, and then he pressed the keys again.

Then he held the phone up to his ear, awaiting the other person’s response.

However, there was no conversation after 30 seconds, and so he closed his phone.

Itami turned to the MP who was staring at him and laughed, “heh heh heh”.

“What, what’s going on?”

Perhaps he was afraid, but MP A turned his shotgun on Itami.

“Hm~ ...what shall I do now.”

Itami tilted his head to look at the ceiling. There was a camera in his room. The red LED light indicating that it was on blinked.

“What’s happening?”

Even Kuribayashi was puzzled, and she asked Itami what was going on.

“...”

Itami fell silent for a while, and then he suddenly jerked his head back and shouted, “Oi, Tuka.”

“Ah, what is it?”

And then Tuka responded. She did not look like she was asleep; she raised her head immediately upon being called.

“Come over here for a bit.”

“Er, hang on... my clothes...”

Tuka reached for the blanket Kuribayashi handed her, but Itami grabbed her hand and pulled her over, then embraced her.

“This is fine. Besides, you’ll be taking them off anyway.”

“Eh? Ehhhhh!?”

Itami grunted as he lifted Tuka — still swaddled in the blanket — in a princess carry.

“Hang on, el-tee!?” Kuribayashi had a surprised look on her face and froze in the middle of a strange movement.

As Itami scooped her up, Tuka went “Uwaaahhh~”

“So you were pretending to be asleep after all, huh?”

“You, you knew!?”

“My ears have always been good. And I know that when you’re really sleeping, you don’t go

huuu~ but sss~ sss~.”

“El-el-tee, what are you doing all of a sudden?”

“Lieutenant Itami. What on earth are you up to, sir!?”

Kuribayashi and Tomita called out to him, and MP A — who essentially never moved from his position — walked up in front of Itami with a pale face.

However, Itami paid the three of them no heed as he spoke to himself.

“If you were worried about what I thought, then why not ask me directly?”

“I, I was embarrassed. And, ah, I wanted to see how you felt about me, so I asked Shino.”

“Didn’t you know?”

“How would I know? I won’t know unless you tell me clearly!”

“Ah, what am I going to do with you. Then I’ll make you understand...”

Saying so, Itami dumped Tuka on the bed, and then got on top of her like he was trying to press her beneath him.

“Oi, what are you doing!?”

As the MP addressed him, Itami turned to face the man and finally answered:

“I’m thinking about whether I want to do anything lewd with Tuka... would you three mind stepping outside for a bit?”

“How could I do that!? My, my, my job is to keep an eye on you, sir.”

“You say that, but the truth is, you want to watch, right? I’m sure of it, you want to watch, just look at that lecherous expression on your face.”

“How rude! Please don’t do anything weird here, sir!”

“Well, that’s what he said... shall we stop, Tuka? Or do you not mind people watching?”

Itami studied Tuka’s face in the dim light. Tuka squirmed and evaded his gaze shyly, blushing red to the tips of her ears before quietly saying:

“I’ll do what you want, Youji...”

And then she buried her face in Itami’s neck.

“Then I’ll help myself.”

As they saw how serious the two of them looked, Kuribayashi and Tomita fled the ward like they had been ambushed by overwhelming numbers.

However, MP A froze in place and hesitated.

“No, I can’t. I have my duty... 2nd Lieutenant Itami, it’s not too late. Please reconsider!”

“No, I can’t. I might have a parasite inside me, so there’s no telling if I’ll

survive until tomorrow. When I think about that, being seen or whatnot doesn't matter any more."

"But, but, but public indecency is a crime!"

"This ward is a private space, right? But you're calling it public indecency... Don't you think that's a little unreasonable?"

"But, but, but, I'm here, you know? Also, Tuka-kun, are you really alright with this!?"

And then Tuka cheerfully replied:

"When the man a woman loves takes an interest in her, she'll get aroused, right?"

The two of them began kissing passionately and they put on a show for MP A, as though to say "

do you even want to see this"

as their tongues met each other. Itami pushed Tuka to the bed and pinned her underneath him before fondling her pert, round breasts. Tuka looked at Itami in surprise for a moment, but then she smiled, and nodded to show her full approval.

Itami spoke quietly so the others would not hear.

"Here I come, Tuka."

Itami reached a hand behind her back and put some strength into his fingertips, and Tuka looked like she was about to melt as she breathed, "come, then". However, she turned away from the MP and said, "I can't do it after all," before looking pleadingly at MP A.

"I'm begging you. I don't want people to see my first time. Please don't look! Please!"

"Guh!"

MP A's boots clomped against the floor as he fled the room. The impact of Tuka saying, "please, it's my first time" had triumphed over his sense of duty.

After Itami heard the door slam, he sighed deeply, still on top of Tuka.

“Haaaah. Let’s go, then. I used the same trick before, so I was a bit worried if it would work, but fortunately it all turned out for the best.”

“Mm. We’re alone together at last... come then.”

“Eh?”

“Eh!?”

“Er, sorry... that’s not it. That’s not what I meant.”

“What do you mean, that’s not it!? What do you mean, that’s not what you meant!? And what did you mean by “I used the same trick before?” Did you do this with someone else!?”

“Nononono, that’s true, but not true at the same time. In any case, listen to me, Tuka. There’s problems with the Gate, and Taro-kakka called me...”

“Don’t try to change the subject. Who did you do it with!?”

“I’m saying, Lelei might have been kidnapped by someone.”

“What!? You did it with Lelei!”

And you just left me alone

— at some point, Tuka had begun pounding on Itami’s chest.

“That’s not it~! In any case, just calm down first! We need to get out of here, so please put your clothes on.”

Tuka glared at Itami, but soon she replied, “...mm, got it,” and got dressed obediently.

Itami saw that she had no intention of covering up her fully nude body, and so he hurriedly blocked the ceiling camera with a towel.

“But don’t think it’s over! I’m going to have you explain everything to me!”

Itami replied, “I, I understand,” as Tuka pressed the issue.

For some reason, there seemed to be an aura of wrath spreading out from behind Tuka’s back.

“Things being what they are, can I count on help from the two... no, the three of you?”

Then, three heads leaned in through the window.

Kurokawa was on top, Tomita was on the middle and Kuribayashi was on the bottom. The three of them asked, “What should we do?” before looking at each other.

“I’m not too sure what’s going on, but if it’s for Lelei, I’m in,” Kuribayashi said.

“Same here,” Tomita replied.

“What am I going to do with you,” Kurokawa replied. “I’m in two, like the two below.”

“Who’s below?”

“The two of you, of course. Who else is there?”

“Er...”

She really is looking down on us,

Tomita muttered as he looked up, but his voice was a bit louder than he had expected.

“Ohhhhhh!”

There was a commotion among the security guards.

As the rows of LCD displays suddenly began displaying AV images, the duty personnel gulped and leaned forward.

The high-definition camera meant that it could produce a bright image even in the dimly-lit room, and they could see everything going on inside.

Sadly, it was a black and white image, but that simply evoked a voyeuristic thrill from these men.

“Hey, isn’t this girl the same age as a high-schooler?”

“That bastard, he’s doing illegal crap again!”

“Arrest him! Arrest him!” the men shouted. Someone even began heading towards Itami’s room. However, one calm voice said, “Never mind,” and settled

everybody else down.

“Look at her ears. She’s an Elf, so her age definitely isn’t what it appears to be.”

As part of their self-reflection for wrongfully arresting Itami, they had to learn about Itami and his companions. In addition, Rory, Tuka and Lelei had testified before the National Diet before, and what they had said was a matter of public record, and could be obtained.

“That black goth loli is over 900 years. Then there’s that Tuka girl, she’s 160 years old. Although, Lelei-san is 16, so if he tried anything with her, we could give him a hard time...”

“It’s true,” the men said as they broke into a commotion.

“So she’s over 100 years old? Seriously? Amazing, she’s still so beautiful!”

“Don’t judge her by human standards. That’s how her race is. In human terms, she’d be a tenth of that age or something.”

“That means she’d be 16... and underage!”

“Ah, I’m so jealous! I’d go to the Special Region too if it meant I could meet girls like this!”

The camera had been positioned to cover the entire room. As a result, the bed was in the background. However, the security personnel tried to zoom in on it.

However, just as everyone thought the action was about to begin, Itami realized that the camera was there and used a towel to cover it up.

The men cursed the black screen before them.

“D-dammit! It stopped at such a good place!”

As the MPs muttered about that sort of thing between themselves, MP A — who was supposed to be standing watch over Itami’s room — returned to the guard post amidst resounding footsteps.

A sank down on a chair and everyone looked at him. Some of their gazes held pity, but on the whole, they were judgmental. Most of them were jealous

because “They’re enjoying themselves because you abandoned your duty and came back, no?”

“Hey, isn’t this bad?”

“She begged me. She said, ‘it’s my first time, so please go’, so I couldn’t stay.”

MP A’s voice was vaguely angry as he delivered his breathless reply. At this everyone’s eyes went wide.

“What! Her first time!?”

“And there might be a parasite in that man’s body. If it chewed its way out, we’d have to kill him as well, so when I thought about it, I could understand why she felt that way regardless of the time or place. Don’t you think so too?”

The MPs considered Itami’s situation from the perspective of the duty given to them.

According to the reports given to them, Itami might not be able to live until tomorrow. There would be no guarantees of “after I’m discharged” or “We’ll talk about this later “. In a very literal sense, every day might be his last. Once again, this was all the information they had.

“If they don’t know when they might part for the last time...”

Since it might be their last goodbye, then it could not be helped — they would have to let him off, in a form of warrior’s compassion. The men discussed the topic.

“Still, this does violate the rules of service.”

“Chief!”

An old officer with a neatly-groomed uniform stood at the door.

“I received a report that something funny was happening at the observation ward... it would seem things have become quite prickly.”

“Yes, but...”

“I understand However, this something else entirely. Even under these circumstances, he might end up pulling something strange.”

“Then should we go back to observe? Right now?”

The MPs grew tense. As they looked at the blank screen, everyone felt that entering their ward now would be terribly insensitive.

However, what their chief said put everyone at ease.

“Well, in that case, then two hours later... yes. You are scheduled for a regular check-in two hours later. Therefore, you will “return to their ward immediately’. Do you understand?”

“Ah, yes.”

Although he had told him to go back immediately, he was only scheduled to report in two hours later, which was a very subtle way of phrasing his intentions. The MPs felt that he had handled the matter very well.

MP A exited the guard room as ordered, but he deliberately chose to take the long way back.

He pointlessly strode down the hallways, went in and out of doors, and wandered aimlessly back and forth. It would seem that he was trying to take a full two hours to reach Itami’s room.

After successfully chasing away Itami’s shadow in the form of MP A, Itami and Tuka hid in a dumpster that he had asked Kurokawa to prepare. Then they added several folded layers of blankets on top of their heads before closing the lid over them.

This was how he asked Kurokawa to get Tuka and himself out of the Infectious Diseases block.

“What am I going to do with you. This is the only time I’m going to do this, you know.”

MP B, standing watch at the entrance to the block, called out to Kurokawa as he saw her approach.

“Cleaning at this time?”

“There’s no day or night when it comes to the patients. Especially when there’s

filthy

things to dispose. You need to take care of it right away.”

The emphasis on “filthy” meant that MP B did not try to pry into the matter. And so, Tomita and Kuribayashi walked past him.

“Ah, thanks for your hard work.”

“Where are you two going at this time?”

“Ahaha~ well, we saw something we shouldn’t have seen, so we were planning to go kill some time at a family restaurant.”

Neither Tomita nor Kuribayashi were under observation, so they had not been forbidden from leaving. It was just that MP B felt that it was a little late to be doing so. However, he could understand how they felt, and he looked on them sympathetically as they left.

Elsewhere, Itami and the others took the lift to the roof of the hospital.

“This is all I can do, the rest is up to you, el-tee. I don’t know what happened to Lelei, but I’ll be expecting an explanation and payment for this, so prepare yourself.

“I, I understand.”

The hospital was equipped for a fire with fire hoods and rappelling gear... including rope, belaying devices and the like. Itami’s plan was to escape the hospital with that equipment.

He took the crane arm out of the storage cabinet and secured the rope on it around Tuka’s waist. He stood on it as well, and lowered the two of them from the roof’s edge.

The two of them slowly descended with a creaking sound.

But for some reason, MP A appeared at the place where Itami was about to touch down.

“Oh no!”

The man with the shotgun in hand was probably walking around outside the building to kill time.

The emergency rappelling rope could not be stopped halfway. If this kept up, the two of them would land in front of the MP.

“Dammit, why did he have to show up at a place like this?”

A was caring for the two of them in his own way by killing his time in a place like this. However, to Itami and Tuka right now, he was nothing but an annoyance. And still, gravity continued pulling them mercilessly downwards.

“Guh!”

“Hm?”

MP A sensed something and turned around.

He swivelled his shotgun towards the source of the sound without any hesitation, looking carefully to see what had made it.

“...What the heck, it’s a cat.”

He saw a stray cat in front of him. It was a tabby tomcat.

These stray cats were half-raised on the leftovers of the hospital. The surroundings were hygienic and it was close by, and while this was not exactly a good thing, both the patients and staff were very compassionate and fed them, so they were unwilling to leave.

The cat looked suspiciously at the deadly weapon pointed its way, and went “myaaa”.

Man and beast stared each other down in silence, and tension filled the surrounding air.

A suddenly went “Bang! Kachunk! Bang! Kachunk! Bang! Kachunk!” as he pretended to fire his shotgun and rack the slide in a mock firefight with the cat.

The curious cat seemed puzzled by this surprise development. It hesitated for a moment, and its face froze up.

“Regular rounds don’t work!? Then I’ll have to use my final weapon. Loading cadmium flechette shells!”

Saying so, A pretended to reload. He seemed to be having fun with this.

Perhaps the cat felt that it could no longer humor this person, but it turned

and hurriedly left.

A continued pointing his shotgun at the cat and went “Bang! Kachunk! Bang! Kachunk! Bang! Kachunk!” while occasionally jerking the muzzle back up to imitate the recoil of shooting.

Perhaps he was at ease because nobody had seen him, but A sighed in relief. “Hmph, I’ll let you off for now,” and puffed his chest up.

It was all Tuka and Itami could do not to burst out laughing as they saw A fooling around like this. They clung to the window frame of the Mental Health block and managed to avoid falling onto A’s head, but as long as A was messing around below them, all they could do was cling to the frame and not let go.

On the other side of the window, within the ward... an insomniac patient stared at the golden-haired Elf outside his window.

Was he entranced by her, or was his face frozen in a dream-like stupor? Or perhaps he could not tell dreams apart from reality.

At the end of his vision, Tuka winked to him and raised her index finger before kissing its back, telling him to keep quiet.

The patient seemed to have gotten the message. He obediently nodded to show he understood before lying down on the bed.

Incidentally, this patient — who had been admitted because he was screaming about how “I’m afraid that the sky is falling” — told the others, “I saw an Elf. She kissed me and said it would be alright and that she would protect me, so I should go rest at ease.” Shortly after that, he returned to society and lived a confident life.

“What should we do? Why’s he in a place like this?”

Once again, A was killing time for the sake of Itami and Tuka.

However, the way he was threatening a cat with a shotgun and squatting behind a flowerbed seemed... well, imposing? Or was it dignified? Rather, it seemed cruel in more ways than one. At the same time, it brought an indescribable feeling to mind, or perhaps that was what the people who saw that afterwards would think.

“...”

“...”

“This is kind of troublesome.”

“I’m getting tired.”

Holding tightly to the window frame was quite draining, given their position and their arm-strength.

“What should we do?”

“Do you have a plan?”

“Mhm~ Let me try something.”

Tuka swirled her index finger and whispered quietly to the spirits. Then she went “Ei~” and pointed at MP A.

After that, a gust of wind knocked off A’s uniform cap.

The cap rolled over the ground to the other side of the building, and A broke into a run to retrieve it.

“Good.”

Itami and Tuka kicked off the window frame and landed on the ground. He quickly undid the safety belt around Tuka, and then pulled her by the hand while running in the opposite direction from which A had gone.

Shortly after leaving the hospital, Itami met with Kuribayashi and Tomita again.

They squeezed into the rental car they had hired, and Itami told the driver about a certain riverside golf course between Saitama and Tokyo Prefecture.

“So, what’s going on?”

Tuka and the other indicated that it was about time for him to explain himself. While the fact that they had helped him without asking questions showed how much they trusted him, it had only pushed the questioning back,

not excused it entirely.

Itami thought about the order in which he should begin explanation, and decided to start with the conclusion.

“According to Taro-kakka, Prime Minister Morita saw Lelei’s staff in the possession of the Chinese ambassador.

“What does that mean?”

“There’s a few possibilities. Maybe they just stole the staff. Maybe they made a fake staff...”

“In that case, there’d be no need to escape the hospital in such a hurry.”

“You’re right. But the final possibility is that Lelei’s been captured.”

Tuka groaned quietly.

However, Kuribayashi stated the question which came naturally.

“But el-tee, Lelei was still there when we left Arnus. How did they take her away to China!?”

“His Excellency was quite focused on that too. Our communications with the Special Region have been severed, so we can’t verify the truth. Therefore, we need to operate under assumption of the worst-case scenario. Thus, I need to go back to Arnus.”

“But if Lelei was brought back to China, how can we save her?”

“If that’s really the case, then it’s outside the range of what I can do by myself. But His Excellency thinks she wasn’t taken to China. There’s a high chance Lelei’s still in the Special Region.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Otherwise, there’s no way to explain why they took such drastic action.”